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MIKE SHAYNE

MYSTERY MAGAZINE



SEPTEMBER, 1968

VOL. 23, NO. 4

St. Gerace

NEW MIKE SHAYNE SHORT NOVEL

DEATH IS MY MISTRESS

by BRETT HALLIDAY

She had left her home, her loved ones, and no one knew why. Was it a man? Fear of disgrace? Rebellion against a too possessive family? Whatever it was, one thing began to be obvious. Her only dowry, besides beauty, was—Murder. And Mike Shayne alone dared guess why.

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THE NEW COMPLETE
MIKE SHAYNE
SHORT NOVEL



She was lovely, alluring, everything a man could want. But her only dowry was—Murder! And Mike Shayne alone guessed why . . .

DEATH IS MY MISTRESS

by Brett Halliday

MICHAEL SHAYNE drove north from Miami, making the fifteen miles to Moreton Bay in less than half an hour despite the heavy tourist traffic in the season. He drove easily through the town. It had once been a fishing village, but now was a fat suburban town.

The split-level ranch house of John Senter was set back from the winding tract road behind a redwood rail fence. Flower beds made a geometrical pattern in the green expanse of lawn. Shayne parked in the driveway behind a new Buick. The three-car garage beyond the Buick was empty.

Shayne walked up a gravel walk to the front door. A tall, slender man appeared back at the corner of the house near the garage.

"This way, Mr. Shayne. We never go in the front door. Good carpet, you know. You are Mike Shayne?"

Shayne walked back to the side of the house.

"I'm Shayne," he said. "You're John Senter?"

"Yes," Senter said, nodded. "Come in."

They went in through the side entrance into the kitchen. A tall brunette, gone heavy everywhere except in the neck, sat at a kitchen table, drinking black coffee and clenching her fingers.

"My wife, Gladys," Senter said. "This is Mr. Shayne, dear."

"I know who he is," Gladys Senter snapped. "The question is can he get Mary back."

"How long has your daughter

been missing, Mrs. Senter?" Shayne asked.

Senter looked at the clock on the kitchen wall. "Twenty-two hours. She showed up at school, said she didn't feel well, and those idiots let her walk out!"

"They couldn't be expected to do our job for us," Gladys Senter said.

Shayne interrupted. "So she's been away most of yesterday and all last night? Alone?"

"How do we know?" Gladys Senter snapped: "You're the detective."

"I doubt if she's alone," Senter said, ignoring his wife. "She's been seeing a great deal of a boy named Tom Acker. I had to tell Acker to stay away from here."

"What's wrong with the boy?" Shayne said.

"He's a beach bum, a no-good."

"No, he works," Gladys Senter said. "On a fishing boat out at The Point."

"Don't tell me he's not a bum!" Senter cried. "He's been in trouble all his life. That father of his is a bum, too! He lets the boy run wild, do whatever he pleases!"

Gladys Senter looked up at Shayne. "My husband expects young people to act the way he never did as a boy. Mary is to be a fine young lady and a credit to us. Unfortunately, she is a strong girl with a mind of her own, and that annoys John."

"It doesn't annoy you?" Shayne said.

"No, not at all," Gladys Senter said. "But I do want to be sure she is all right."

"If she's with Tom Acker how could she be all right?" John Senter said. "All night! With that bum!"

"Are you worried about her safety or her chastity?" Shayne said bluntly. "Do you want her back, or do you want her married?"

"I'm worried about both, and I want her back. Damn it, Shayne, she's seventeen!"

Shayne nodded. "All right. Do you have a picture?"

"I'll get one," Gladys Senter said.

The tall brunette left the kitchen. Senter bit his fingernails. He seemed to be watching something outside the kitchen window. Whatever it was he did not like it much.

"I'm not as bad as I sound, Shayne," Senter said. "I'd like my daughter to be happy, but these young punks today—Acker isn't much worse than most of them, but he's somehow older than the others, more sure of himself. He's only twenty, but he acts like he's been on his own forever. He's dangerous."

"Mature?" Shayne said drily. Senter gave the redhead a sharp look. "No, not mature. Too big for his britches! He's a big kid, strong, and he acts as if that makes him a man. It doesn't. Gladys says he works. Sure, he cuts bait on his

father's boat and gets overpaid for it."

"What makes you think she's with him?"

Senter glanced at the inner door. "I don't think. I know. I didn't tell Gladys yet, but some of her classmates saw her meet him outside the school. He got into the car and that was the last anyone has seen of her."

"She has a car?"

"Yes. I always thought her a steady girl."

"What kind of car?"

"A green Triumph sport car."

Gladys Senter came back with a small color snapshot.

Shayne looked at it. Mary Senter was a tall girl like her mother, dark and a lot thinner—but not that thin—and well developed for seventeen.

Shayne decided that the girl was pretty, if a little sullen looking. He also decided that girls were maturing, at least physically, a lot earlier these days. Maybe it was the Florida sun.

"All right," Shayne said. "Now let's get it straight about what you want. You want the girl brought home?"

"Dragged if necessary," Senter snapped. "And if you rough up that Acker a bit, it's okay with me. You tell him he's to leave my daughter alone."

"No," Gladys Senter said. "I want Mary to come home because she's too young to go running off.



I want her to talk to me. I want her to convince me she knows what she's doing, and don't you harm that boy. If my husband wants to rough him up, let him do it himself."

Shayne watched the two of them glare at each other. He began to understand Mary Senter, and to feel for the girl. But she was only seventeen, and the Senters had a right to worry about her. But it looked like they were more worried about themselves, their image as parents.

"How do I find this Acker?"

"I don't know," Senter said. "His father has a fishing station out on The Point. I don't know where the boy lives himself. I gather he's out on his own."

"Perhaps Miller can tell him," Gladys Senter said. "Miller Gault is an old childhood friend of Mary's, Mr. Shayne."

"An old boyfriend," Senter said, "and not a lot better than Tom Acker, if any better."

"Where do I find him?"

"He should be at school. The Ames Street School, a few blocks from here."

"Anything else you think I should know?"

The Senters looked at each other. They seemed to be thinking. Finally, the woman shrugged, and Senter turned to Shayne.

"No, nothing. Just get her home, Shayne."

"I'll do what I can," Shayne said. "I'll need a retainer. Three days in advance. I get a hundred a day plus expenses."

Senter went to get his check-book.

II

MIKE SHAYNE drove up to The Ames Street School. In the office they sent for the Gault boy. The messenger came back alone. The Gault boy was not in school.

"Is that unusual?" Shayne asked the assistant principal.

"Not for Gault," the assistant said. "Is it important you find him?"

"It could be."

"Then try The Beach House. It's a kind of lunch stand and tav-

ern down at the edge of the town beach. You won't have any trouble finding it, just look for the hot-rods and sport cars."

Shayne thanked the principal and went back to his car. He drove into the downtown section of Moreton Bay and asked directions to The Beach House. The woman who grudgingly gave him the directions looked him up and down as if she thought he was a trifle old to be a hot-rodder.

He found The Beach House surrounded by hot-rods, as billed, even now during morning school hours. It made him feel depressed. There had always been, and always would be, stupid or delinquent kids who cut school from an early age.

But today there were many, many more, and sometimes he wondered if the kids had grown worse, or if the adults simply had nothing to teach that the kids could believe any more.

He parked and got out and looked over the beach where bearded boys and bikinied girls lounged in the sun or dashed into the water to frolic and swim. He noticed that most of them were good swimmers. Two giggling girls sent him to a corner of the beach house to find Miller Gault.

He walked up to a group of five boys who seemed to own the corner. They watched him come. They were not wearing bathing suits, and they were not friendly.

"Which one of you is Miller Gault?" Shayne asked.

They all looked at each other in mock bewilderment. The tallest of them grinned at Shayne.

"Say, now," the tallest said, "the man wants Gault. Now how come you wants Gault, mister man?"

"I'll tell Gault," Shayne said. "Which one? Come on."

They began to chant, "Which one! . . . come on! . . . Which one . . . come on . . ."

Shayne reached out his big hand and caught one of them by the shoulder. He squeezed. The boy went pale. Shayne's grey eyes narrowed.

"No trouble, punks. Just a couple of questions. Okay?"

Instantly the other four turned silent, glaring. They began to circle him. Shayne let go of the one he had squeezed. The five of them stepped around him like cats.

"Fuzz?" the tallest one said. "We don't like fuzz, Jack. You better beat it, fast."

"No police," Shayne said, his eyes quiet but watching them. They were young and strong, but they were not yet grown enough to have hardened. "Just a couple of questions about a kid named Tom Acker."

The tallest one let a thin smile play on his face. "Gault, now Tom Acker. Make up your mind, mister fuzz."

Shayne stepped to the tallest boy. The boy backed off, and his

hand snaked into his pocket, and came out with a long knife. The switchblade jumped out like a snake's tongue.

The boy began to toss it lightly from hand to hand, moving softly toward Shayne. Shayne watched him quietly. The knife glinted in the sun as it flew from hand to hand.

"You was gonna say somethin' more?" the boy said.

Shayne watched the knife and backed off a step. The boy came on, his eyes bright with a sense of power the glinting knife gave him. His lips skinned back in a grin, and he advanced one more step on Shayne.

Shayne's right hand darted forward so fast the boy was in mid-step toward him before he was aware Shayne's hand had moved.

The boy tried to recover, but Shayne caught the knife in mid-toss and stood there grinning at the boy with the knife in his big hand.

"Listen—" the boy began.

The other four stood gaping. Shayne's eyes were cold. He stepped toward the boy, tossing the knife from hand to hand in the exact same manner.

"Just some questions, punk, that's all. You got to pull a knife? You're still in diapers, punk. If you were a man I'd have cut you from gizzard to ear by now."

The other four watched the tallest boy. The boy was on test now, had been challenged. There was

nothing he could do but back down or try to fight back. He tried to fight. His hand darted out to repeat Shayne's maneuver.

The boy caught the knife, and for one instant his eyes gleamed. Then Shayne's right hand had his wrist. Shayne smiled. Without effort he applied pressure. The knife fell from the boy's fingers.

Shayne forced the boy to his knees. "All right, sonny. Now which one of you is Gault?"

The boy spat. Shayne twisted the wrist. The boy cried out.

"I'm Miller Gault," one of the other boys said. "What do you want, mister?"

"Where does Tom Acker live? No tricks."

"He's got a pad in the Fig Tree Apartments out near The Point," Miller Gault said. "You looking for Mary?"

"That's right," Shayne said. "She with him?"

"She was. You said you wasn't fuzz?"

"I'm not. I'm a private detective," Shayne said. "Mary's parents just want her back."

Miller Gault looked at him. "How they gonna do that? Get her back, I mean? She's been gone from them a long time."

Shayne watched the boy, but he had no answer to that. He released the wrist of the tallest boy, looked down at him once, then walked away. They were punks and bums, but underneath it there

was something else—a world they couldn't believe.

In his car he drove away from The Beach House. He asked directions for The Fig Tree Apartments. He drove out of the town toward a long peninsula of land that jutted out into the sea and a wide area of marshes and small rivers.

Shayne wondered what he had done to the five boys, made them more wary of the adult world, or more cunning in their relative weakness?

The Fig Tree Apartments was a complex of two-story buildings with open balconies around a central swimming pool. The manager in the office told him that Tom Acker had apartment 10. The manager didn't know if Acker was home.

"He was here this morning," the manager said. "Came in with some young girl, nice. Had her own car. Leastways they had a car, and I know Acker don't own one."

Shayne crossed the sunny court with the pool shimmering empty and blue, and climbed three stone steps to the lower bank of apartments on the left. Number 10 was at the very end near the rear where the marsh began immediately behind the buildings.

Shayne knocked and waited. There was no answer. He heard no sounds inside. He tried the door. It was locked.

"They've gone," a voice said.

III

MIKE SHAYNE turned to see a slim, curved blonde in a bikini and a steel smile.

"Earlier this morning," the blonde said. "Good riddance."

"You know Tom Acker, Miss—" Shayne said.

She laughed. "Yeah, I know Tom Acker, damn me. You look like a man with a problem. How about a drink?"

"Sounds good, if early."

"Anything good is never too early."

"You've got a point," Shayne said.

"Come on in," the blonde said.

Shayne followed the blonde into apartment number 11. It was the first apartment in the cross building, its door at an angle to number 10. It was bright with sun, and well-furnished.

The blonde waved Shayne to a seat and stood over a well-stocked liquor cabinet.

"Name it," she said, "and my name is Anne Hyde."

"Sidecar, if you've got the makings," Shayne said. "Miss or Mrs.?"

"Mrs. But don't let it throw you. Mr. Hyde prefers Viet-Nam to me. I'm free as air, if more expensive, and I can make anything. Cointreau-and brandy coming up."

Shayne watched Mrs. Anne Hyde while he waited. She moved with precision, but her movements had the faint hesitation of the con-



stant drinker. Anne Hyde had had a few already this morning. She was something to see, though.

At another time Shayne could think of a fine way to spend the day. Her eyes had the same idea as she handed him his sidecar and looked him over like a meat buyer considering some livestock.

"Why do you say good riddance, Mrs. Hyde?" Shayne said. "About Tom Acker, I mean."

She sat, her long legs smooth and tawny. "Do we have to talk about that crumb? And call me Anne. You're a nice looking man."

"I have to talk about him," Shayne said, "and thanks. Was he alone earlier?"

"No. What do you think I'm mad about?" she said, and she stood and paraded in front of

Shayne. The redhead could feel it in his shoes.

"Look at me," she said. "Now why would a big kid like Tom want some juvenile jezebel when he could have this! No strings, no problems."

"He turned you down?"

"Cold," she said. "At least he did the last four months since he took up with his adolescent Delilah."

"Was she with him this morning?"

"All of her, and not just this morning. They were here all night. I heard them battling away in there like a couple of paratroopers."

"Fighting? All night?"

"Not fighting, living it up," she said. "Anyway, making noise, let me tell you. Television blaring half the night. Glasses smashing once or twice. I tell you."

The manager implied Acker only came home this morning."

"The manager is blind and deaf," Anne Hyde said. "Maybe they went out for air. I slept kind of late, but they came back, and she looked like it had been a long, hard night."

"You didn't hear them go out?"

"No, but I sure heard them drive up last night. I went out to see if Tommy boy was in the mood and I saw her. Not a bad broad, if you like robbing the cradle."

Shayne dug out his picture. Anne Hyde looked at the photo

and nodded. "Yeah, that's her. I've seen her here before. Damn her! Tommy's a nice boy, you know. I was doing fine until she came along. Real young love, phooey."

"You think it's a real romance?"

"Sure it is," she said with disgust. "I ought to know that kind of caper when I see it, believe me. He dropped me like a plate of cold pastrami. Me!"

"He must be in love," Shayne said drily. He finished his drink and stood up.

The blonde stared. "You too? What's wrong with me? I used to have them crying on their knees."

"It's just your bad day," Shayne said. "Love and duty wins out."

"Duty is better," she said. "It ends. When duty is over, come back. Okay?"

"I'll keep it in mind."

"Do that," Anne Hyde said. "I'm not going anywhere."

Shayne grinned and walked back out into the sun. The pool was still empty, but three people had wandered out in bathing suits, and sat now near the pool, staring at the blue surface as if trying to decide if the pleasure, and the privilege of a pool, was worth the effort required to dive and then swim.

Shayne knocked on the door of number 10 again. There was still no answer. He glanced around and saw that more people were coming out of the apartments and gather-

ing at the pool. He went to the open space between the building that housed apartment number 10, and the building that began with Anne Hyde's apartment. The marsh was deserted behind the buildings.

Shayne turned and walked back past the pool and the office to his car. He got in and drove off until he was out of sight. Then he turned again and drove to the right until he found a road that ran parallel to the road to The Fig Tree. He turned again and drove back toward the apartments.

The road ended in a dirt track that seemed to go straight into the marshes. Shayne drove along the dirt road until he was behind the Fig Tree Apartments. Then he parked and made his way across the marshes to the rear of apartment 10. He was out of sight from number 11, and the shades on the windows in all the other apartments were drawn.

The shades were down in apartment 10, too. Shayne tried all four windows with no luck. The rear door was locked tight. He listened for a full minute at each window and heard nothing. He looked around, then took out his ring of keys and went to work on the back door.

The third key he tried clicked the lock open. There was no chain, and Shayne pushed the door open quickly, and slid inside. He stood in a small hall and listened. There

was still no sound. He pushed open a door and entered the small kitchen.

The kitchen was neat and clean, with everything in place. Even the floor was swept. There was food in the refrigerator, and dishes in the drying rack indicated that the apartment was lived in. But there was no evidence of anyone having eaten a meal for at least a day, and no signs of wild partying.

Shayne went on out into the small living room. It was as neat and clean as the kitchen, with an anonymous feel to it. Even the ashtrays were clean and empty. There were no books, and no signs of a party here, either.

Shayne was puzzled. He could think of no reason for Anne Hyde to lie about the noises she had heard, and cleaning up so thoroughly did not sound like the Tom Acker he had heard about.

He went into the bedroom.

A man lay on the floor.

A dead man.

IV

MIKE SHAYNE stood in the doorway to the bedroom and stared down at the dead man.

The man lay on the floor near the bed. There was blood—dry and brown blood.

Chairs were overturned, and a table lay on its side. Yet the room, too, was strangely neat and empty. Shayne went and bent down over

the body. The man had been stabbed twice in the chest.

The man was small and thick-set, with a dark face and jet black hair. The face was not handsome: a rugged face with a pug nose and a wide mouth and dark-circled, staring eyes.

Shayne searched the body gingerly. There was no identification, but in a shoulder holster under his coat the dead man carried a snub-nosed .38 police special.

The pistol was loaded, but was on safety, and did not seem to have been taken from its holster. The man's suit coat was still buttoned. There was some hundred dollars in his pocket, keys, a book of matches from a tavern in New Orleans, and no wallet.

Shayne stood up. His gray eyes looked around the room. The bedroom, too, had a stripped feel to it. The tables and bureaus were clean and bare. Shayne stepped to the bureaus and opened the drawers one by one. They were all completely empty.

He walked to the closets and looked into them. The closets were also empty. Shayne tugged slowly on his earlobe, and stared at the empty closets. There was nothing: no clothes, no shoes, no suitcases, and no debris.

Tom Acker had moved out.

This was something that neither Anne Hyde nor the manager seemed to know. The question was—had Acker moved out before

or after the thick-set man had been killed?

Shayne made another careful search of the apartment, but found nothing. Acker had cleaned it out well. He examined the body once more with no better results. Then he went back to the kitchen and slipped out the way he had entered.

He looked around, but saw no one. He closed and locked the door, and walked quickly back through the marsh to his car. No one seemed to have spotted his car. He got in and drove back into Moreton Bay.

At a public telephone booth he called the local police and reported the body in apartment 10. He hung up without giving his name.

Back in his car, Mike Shayne drove out to The Point again, and inquired for Acker's fishing station. He found the place far out at the end of the point on a body of marshy water that was the mouth of a small river. The coastal marshes stretched into the distance on the other side of the river mouth.

Acker's station was a small shack set out on piles over the water, with a neat frame house set on dry land close to it. A long cabin cruiser was tied up at the dock beyond the fishing station shack.

Shayne parked near the board ramp that led out to the station shack. He walked out on the boards and entered the shack. It was dim inside the shack. There were two

long counters with glass fronts, and fishing tackle was piled everywhere. Rods hung from the ceiling. Two freezers held bait.

A tall, slender man appeared from somewhere in the shadows of the shack.

"Yes, sir? Going fishing?"

"Not right now," Shayne said. "I'm looking for Mr. Acker."

"I'm Fred Acker," the man said, "Do I know you?"

"No," Shayne said. "I want to ask some questions."

The tall man watched Shayne quietly. Acker had yellow-flecked brown eyes, and his gray hair was cut short like a wire brush. Tall and slender as he was, there was more than a suggestion of strength and power to the man.

"What about, Mr—"

"Shayne. Mike Shayne. I want to know where I can get in touch with your son."

"Police?"

"No, just a private detective. Can you tell me where I can find Tom?"

"That depends what you want with him," Acker said. "If you're a private detective you must be working for someone."

"My client is confidential," Shayne said, "but I'll tell you that what I'm interested in is the girl."

"Girl?"

"Mary Senter," Shayne said. "Your son seems to have run off with the girl. She's only seventeen. You understand?"



Acker seemed to be thinking it over. His yellow eyes studied Shayne carefully as if not at all sure that Shayne were telling the truth.

"The girl's with him of her own free will, I expect," Acker said.

"That's one of the things I'd like to find out," Shayne said.

"I know Mary," Acker said. "She's a good, bright girl. She knows what she's doing. If she's with Tom, she went on her own accord."

"She still has parents, and she's under age," Shayne said. "Her parents at least have a right to talk to her, be sure she knows what she's doing. If your son's a decent boy he'd want her parents to at least know exactly how Mary feels."

Acker flared up. "Damn you, Tom's a fine boy, you hear? He's the best, and he's going to have a chance! If he wants Mary, he's going to have all my help to keep her. The kids need a chance."

"What kind of chance, Acker?" Shayne said. "She's under age, and so is he. If her parents decide to

get rough they have the law on their side. You want your boy to have the chance to run with the police looking for him?"

Acker breathed heavily for a long minute. Then his yellow-flecked eyes flickered away from Shayne. He sighed.

"Okay, Mr. Shayne. I guess you're right. Tom lives at The Fig Tree Motel, apartment ten. He'll have Mary there with him."

Shayne shook his head, watching the man. "I've been there. No one home. They came and went again early this morning."

"You've been there?" Acker said, and frowned. "That's funny. Tom has no reason not to be there."

"You're sure?"

"Of course I'm sure. They were by here last night. As far as I knew they were going home."

"Where else might they have gone?"

Acker considered. "Well, Tom spoke of heading up for Palm Beach. I've got a cousin up that way. Tom's been there before; he always liked it. I suppose they might have been worried about her parents."

"What's the name of your cousin?"

"Jim Vance. He lives at 1430 Beach Court, Palm Beach Shores."

"Do you know the telephone number?"

"962-3475," Acker said. "That's not his number. He doesn't have a phone, but they'll get to him on

that number. He can call you back."

"All right," Shayne said, "and if Tom happens to come back, you tell him that Mary had better call home."

"I will," Acker said.

Shayne left the tall man chewing at his lip. He walked back across the boards to his car. He drove off toward town. As soon as he was out of sight of the fishing station he turned the car and headed slowly back.

He parked where he could watch the neat house and the front door of the fishing station. He lit a cigarette, and waited. He did not have long to wait. The cigarette was barely half smoked when Fred Acker came out of the fishing station, walked to the house, and went into the garage.

Shayne started his engine and watched a small, black compact car back out of Acker's garage and turn away from him. He eased away from the edge of the road and followed.

V.

FRED ACKER'S car went all the way to the end of The Point where a bascule bridge crossed the mouth of the small river in three stages, from island to island.

Shayne drove carefully, and followed along a good secondary road that skirted the sea to the north with the marshes to the left. The

road seemed to lead nowhere—a scenic drive, with the beach to the right and small fishing boats out on the water.

From time to time Mike Shayne, and Acker ahead, passed other fishing stations built on the banks of the many small rivers the road crossed over.

There were no towns, and the road began to curve steadily to the west toward the main highway. Shayne had begun to think that Fred Acker had called Palm Beach himself and was now heading up to try to reach his son before Shayne or anyone else did, when the black compact suddenly made a left and vanished into the marshes and tall swamp trees.

Shayne slowed and saw the dirt road that led off into the thick trees. He parked for a moment, and then turned into the side road and followed slowly. The road was narrow and made a lot of twists and turns; he had to be careful not to come suddenly upon Acker and tip his hand.

He drove in semi-darkness despite the noon hour, through the dense overgrowth of trees and marsh vines. Spanish moss festooned the trees, and here and there groves of mangroves rooted in the marsh like atavistic monsters.

After a mile a narrow river appeared to the left, and a few dilapidated shacks began to be visible through the trees. The road

widened slightly and ended abruptly in a circle. The black car was not there.

Shayne swore and drove slowly on around the circle. He saw the black car far ahead through the trees. It was parked in a grove of mangroves at the end of what was little more than a goat track that led from the circle.

Shayne parked and began to move cautiously through the trees toward the car. He approached the car warily. It was empty. He circled around it and looked for Acker. He did not see the tall man, but he saw an isolated shack far ahead through the marsh.

It was a gray, run-down cabin, and it stood on the shore of a kind of lagoon. It appeared deserted, but Shayne's gray eyes gleamed.

A small, green Triumph sport car stood in front of the cabin.

Shayne moved in closer, taking advantage of the trees to approach the cabin unseen. He was still some twenty yards away among the trees when the shot seemed to spit at him from the window of the cabin.

He went sprawling on the muddy ground, rolled, and came up behind a tree. His automatic was in his big hand.

Nothing moved now in the cabin.

The windows in the front were boarded up. Shayne could see nothing behind them. Whoever had fired had done so through the cracks between the boards.

Shayne waited, watched, but nothing more happened.

He raised up to crawl closer when he heard the sudden coughing roar of a small motor. It came from behind the shack. On the lagoon!

Shayne jumped up warily and ran toward the cabin with his automatic ready and his eyes alert. Nothing happened. He reached the cabin, kicked the door open, and jumped inside. The cabin was empty.

He ran through to a rear door that was open. As he burst out into the light on the bank of the lagoon, another shot rang out and he skidded into a massive mangrove tree as he cut left to duck the shot.

Out on the lagoon a small boat with an outboard motor rapidly gained speed and pulled away toward where the river headed down toward the sea. Shayne watched it go.

Fred Acker sat at the steering handle, looking back. There was a pistol in his other hand. The range was too far now for Acker to hit anything, or for him to be hit. Shayne stood on the shore of the lagoon until the small boat was out of sight.

Acker was alone in the boat.

Shayne went back into the cabin. A more careful search of the two shabby rooms showed that the place was indeed empty, and also showed that it had been recently occupied. Two mattresses

lay side by side on the floor covered by a single thin army blanket. On the table there were the remains of a meal. A bag of groceries stood on the sideboard near the stove.

The table had been set for two, and there was dark lipstick on one of the glasses. In a dark closet Shayne found three suitcases. They held books, personal items of a man, clothes, all tumbled in as if packed in haste. He knew where the contents of apartment 10 in The Fig Tree Apartments had gone. But where was the owner?

Shayne went back out to the green Triumph. It was empty. The trunk was locked. The keys were in the ignition. Shayne took the keys and went back to the trunk. He opened it and found it empty of everything except the usual tools and assorted junk.

"Just hold it right there!" a voice said quietly behind him.

Shayne froze with his hands up on the trunk lid about to close it. He heard steps behind him. Something round and hard jabbed in his back. A big hand patted him and removed his automatic. The hand came back again and removed his wallet.

The hard object went away, and there was a brief silence. Then the voice said:

"Okay. Turn around."

Shayne turned and saw a small, chunky man wearing faded chinos and laced knee boots. The man had piercing gray eyes that

watched Shayne from under the brim of a battered broad-brimmed stetson. He held a short, single-barreled shotgun.

"Let's hear the story, Mr. Shayne. Your weapon hasn't been fired, so who did the shooting?"

"Let's see your right to hear my story," Shayne said.

The man smiled thinly. "I'm holding my right, mister. We're not too happy about Miami peepers working up here. But maybe you got a point. The name's Rico. Deputy Rico," and the man showed a deputy sheriff's badge.

"A man named Fred Acker did the shooting," Shayne said, and explained his reasons for being in Moreton Bay.

"Acker, huh? Where's the boy?"
"Tom? I don't know."

"That's the girl's car, though?"
"Yeah."

Rico nodded slowly. "Uh-huh. So it looks like the boy and the girl are hiding out, eh? Maybe that figures. Okay. Let's take a ride."

"How about Acker? You going after him?"

"We'll find him. Right now some people want to talk to you. At least they will when they find out about you."

Shayne walked back to where he had parked his car. On the way he passed Acker's black compact. A scrawny man in denims stood by Acker's car. Deputy Rico spoke to the man, who joined the procession.

"You drive," Rico said to Shayne.

Shayne got behind the wheel. Rico climbed in beside him. The scrawny man got into a muddy sheriff's car.

Shayne looked at Rico. "Where to?"

"Where? Headquarters, naturally," Rico said. "You're supposed to hang around when you report a killing. Didn't you know?"

Shayne said nothing. He started up and drove back along the dirt side road.

VI

DEPUTY RICO sat lounging in a wooden chair. The afternoon sun was hot in the office. Chief of Moreton Bay Police Don Pepper glared at Mike Shayne. Pepper was a big, hulking man who wore a gold-braided uniform and an enormous pistol at his belt.

"So you find a body, and you call in and walk away," Pepper growled at the redhead. "That the way you operate down in Miami?"

"I was in a hurry," Shayne said. "I needed some time. I called in."

"You are off base, Shayne," Pepper said.

Rico drawled, "Way, way off. We kind of like a private operator to report in to us before he works our area, not to mention waiting when he finds a killing."

"All right," Shayne said. "I wanted to protect my client and a

seventeen-year-old girl. I was coming in, but I didn't want to lose the trail."

Rico and Pepper glanced at each other. Rico shrugged, and Chief Pepper sighed. The burly chief looked hard at Shayne.

"We've talked to Chief Will Gentry down in Miami. He rates you very high. So we'll overlook it for now. Maybe you were coming in. Now let's get down to business. You figure Tom Acker killed this guy?"

"I don't know. Maybe I'd know more when I found out who the dead man was. Shouldn't you check that out?"

Pepper smiled. "We're small here, but we're not stupid. We already checked him out. It turned out to be easy. His prints were on file in Washington and New York. He was a well-known boy named Andy Rojas. A nice long record. Everything from car theft to bank robbery. He only got out of Auburn Prison a month ago."

"What was he in for?" Shayne asked.

"Extortion charge, five years."

"Any idea what he was doing here?"

"No," Pepper said.

"We thought maybe you might have a good idea," Deputy Rico said.

"I don't," Shayne said. "Have you found any connection between this Rojas and Tom Acker?"

"No," Pepper said. "What could

there be? Tom was a kid when Rojas went inside the last time."

Rico drawled, "The old man, Fred Acker, he took some shots at you. It looks like maybe he's worried about something."

Shayne shook his head. "Maybe, or maybe he's trying to help the boy. From the fact that the girl's car was out at that shack, it looks like Acker was out to locate the boy. He could be just trying to help Tom get away."

"How about the girl?" Chief Pepper said. "Maybe the connection is there. What do you know about her parents?"

"Not much," Shayne admitted. "I checked him out a little, and he seems to check. He's assistant personnel manager for Troll-Products here in Moreton Bay."

"Troll?" Rico said. "They make farm and garden chemicals. A pretty big operation."

"As far as I know Senter just wants his daughter to come home. Maybe he's right to be worried about Tom Acker. I figure the first thing to do is find the boy."

"Sounds good," Rico drawled. "You got some ideas?"

"Only start from out at that shack, and maybe find Fred Acker in his outboard."

"We can handle those items," Pepper said.

Rico said, "How about you working on the angle of the girl?"

"All right," Shayne agreed, "but someone should try to find out

more about what Rojas was doing here. He must have been staying somewhere."

"We'll work on that, too," Pepper said.

Shayne nodded and stood up. They returned his wallet and automatic and he left. His car was outside in the headquarters parking lot. Late afternoon sun had made it hot as an oven inside. Shayne sat in it for a time and smoked a cigarette.

Then he drove away and found a roadhouse that had food, drink and a public telephone. He ordered a steak and a bottle of beer. While they were cooking the steak, rare, he went to the telephone and called his reporter friend Tim Rourke at *The Miami Daily News*.

"What's up, Mike? Where are you?" the lean reporter asked from the other end of the line.

"Moreton Bay. Do me a favor, Tim. Check into anything you might have on a hoodlum named Andy Rojas, operates out of New York. Also see if there is anything peculiar in any way about Troll Products in Moreton Bay. Have your financial and business man dig up all he knows on Troll."

"Will do, Mike. Any story in it?"

"Maybe. I don't know yet. I'll call you later for the data, but if you have anything really hot, call Chief Pepper at Moreton Bay Police Headquarters. I'll get the message."

"Okay, Mike," Rourke agreed.



Shayne hung up and called Chief Will Gentry in Miami. As he had expected, Gentry was in conference. He got to his assistant and explained what he wanted.

"Would you ask Will to contact Moreton Bay Police Headquarters, Chief Pepper, and get the details on an ex-con named Andy Rojas?" Shayne said.

"I'll tell the Chief, Mike," the assistant said.

"Good, and have him run Rojas down—everything New York can tell him about the man."

"All right, Mike. What's it about?"

"Tell Will Rojas was killed yesterday, or early this morning,

up in Moreton Bay. I'm trying to find out what he was doing here. He's a New York hood."

"The Chief'll be interested in any New York punk who came down here to get killed."

"Yeah," Shayne said.

After he hung up this time he went back to eat his steak. It was a good steak and the beer was just right for a hot day. Shayne took his time. The police and the sheriff's office were out after both Ackers. They could do as good a job as he could.

When he had finished he went back to the telephone and called John Senter. Gladys Senter answered. She was agitated.

"Where are you?" she snapped. "We've been waiting and waiting! John called your office six times."

"I've been working. Where's your husband?"

"Gone to meet Mary!"

Shayne blinked at the telephone. "Mary? She contacted you?"

"Yes, about an hour ago. She sounded frightened. John tried to locate you, but—"

"Where is Mary?"

"She called from a motel near San Felipe. That's about ten miles north on the highway."

"What motel?"

"The Blue Gulf."

"Was she alone?"

"She didn't say, but she sounded like it. I think that animal has deserted her and—"

"When did your husband leave?"

"Only about twenty minutes ago."

"Stay by the phone," Shayne said and hung up.

He paid and ran out to his car. His map told him that the small town of San Felipe was just about ten miles away, off the highway.

He drove north fast.

VII

SHAYNE TURNED off the highway itself into the center of San Felipe and asked a traffic cop for The Blue Gulf Motel. The cop directed him to the secondary highway that skirted the blue sea in the early evening light.

The Blue Gulf was an old-fashioned motel of the better type: stucco buildings, solid and comfortable looking, with thick groves of royal palms to shade and cool the units. He did not see Senter's Buick.

Shayne parked out of sight and went into the motel office.

A bright, neat young girl looked up.

"Yes, sir. A room?"

"I'm looking for a friend," Shayne said, putting on his best friendly smile. "Two friends to be exact. A young man, big, and a tall, dark girl about seventeen."

The girl at the desk pursed her nice lips. "Well, I'm not sure—I mean, we don't like to give out the names of our tenants. If you could give me some names, and perhaps

talk to them on the telephone . . .”

“Acker,” Shayne said. “Tom Acker.”

She nodded. “Mr. and Mrs. Acker checked in today, but—”

The girl was being very reluctant. Shayne decided to play it straight this time. He wanted to get to Acker and the girl before Senter did. He took out his wallet and showed his credentials.

“I’m a private detective working for the girl’s parents. She’s only seventeen. Her parents want to talk to her.”

The girl seemed to freeze. “So they sent a detective after her? I know about parents like that!”

“They have a right to talk to her, Miss. That’s all I want to do, find her. If she doesn’t want to go back, I won’t drag her. Besides, there’s more to it now.”

The girl hesitated again. Shayne pressed his point.

“She may be in danger,” he said. “Didn’t she make a call about two hours ago? It was to her parents. I think she’s in trouble, Miss.”

“She—she called. Trouble?”

“Trouble,” Shayne said. “Do I go in and look?”

The girl hesitated a moment longer. She had her own dreams of youth and love, but—

She reached for a key.

“I’ll show you,” she said.

Shayne followed her out of the office into the evening sun. All was

quiet and peaceful. The blue of the sea glinted off to the right. Shayne let the girl lead him. She didn’t quite trust him yet.

She stopped in front of a double stucco cottage at the rear near the water. She knocked on the left door. A querulous voice answered.

“Yes?”

“Mrs. Acker? A man to see you.”

There was the sound of footsteps inside, and the door opened. Mary Senter looked out, stared at Shayne. The girl’s eyes were tired, or scared, or both. She seemed to flinch when she saw Mike Shayne.

“I—who are you?”

“My name is Shayne, Miss Senter. Your father hired me to find you.”

The tall girl blinked. “Hired? You mean—?”

“Just what I said. Your parents want to talk to you, and they hired me to find you. I’m a private detective. I won’t take you back unless you want to go. Your father should be here soon, and I’d like to talk about a few things first.”

“Talk? I don’t have anything to talk about. Where is my father?”

“On his way,” Shayne said, wondering if that were true. Senter had had a long start on him. “You know what I want to talk about.”

She made a sound, a small sound. Her hand went up to her mouth. Then she nodded, as if suddenly beaten.

“Come in then,” she said.

The motel girl said, "Are you sure you want to be alone, Mrs. Acker?"

Mary Senter seemed to jump at the name, but she recovered, said, "Yes, I'll be fine. It's all right."

Reluctantly the office girl went away. Shayne stepped into the motel room. He was alert. Where was Tom Acker? He turned to face the girl as she closed the outside door.

"Where's Tom?" Shayne said.

She crossed the room and sat down on a couch. She looked at the floor. "I don't know."

"He checked in here with you."

"Yes, but he had to go away for a while."

"Why?"

Mary Senter said nothing.

"I trailed you to that cabin near the lagoon. You left your car."

"Tom thought my car would be too easy to locate," she said. "He borrowed a small truck."

Shayne waited, but Mary said nothing more. Shayne watched her. She had not turned on the lights and the clean little room was dim.

"I've been to The Fig Tree, Mary," Shayne said. "So have the police. You want to tell me about it all now?"

She made a motion, a vague movement, but still did not speak.

"I found Rojas," Shayne said.

She looked up. "Rojas?"

"The man who was murdered in Tom's apartment."

She stared at Shayne, and then

she began to shiver. She shook for a moment and then took a deep breath. She focused her wide, dark eyes on Shayne.

"I met Tom at the school. Yesterday. We—we went to The Fig Tree. We talked about our plans. Tom has a wonderful chance at a good job in Brazil. We went out that night, last night. We had fun, it was—wonderful."

"You went back to The Fig Tree?"

"No, we went out to the cabin on the lagoon. Tom always liked it there. We just talked. We had a wonderful night. Early this morning we went back to The Fig Tree. We had decided we would get married.

"We didn't even find that—man at first. Then Tom found him in the bedroom. He was scared. He packed everything and we left. We drove back to the cabin. But Tom was worried about that, too. He said the cabin was too well known as somewhere he went."

"So we got the truck and came here. Then Tom began to think. I could see him. He was worried. He said I shouldn't be involved in anything like a murder. He said I should call my parents and go home for now—until he knew what was happening."

Shayne watched her. "He sounds like a solid kid. What did he do himself?"

"He—he said he had to know what happened to that man, why

the man had been killed in his apartment. He said he had to know more. I—I think he was very worried about something."

Mike Shayne said, "So he left you here, and told you to call your parents, and you did. Did he say anything about where he was going or when he'd be back?"

"No. He just said he would be back. I called Dad, but I wish I hadn't!"

"Because he hired me?"

She turned furious eyes on Shayne. "Yes! A detective to track me down! Oh, how could he?"

"Maybe it's lucky he did," Shayne said. "Murder is more in my line. If Tom is innocent, I can help prove that. I—"

A footstep sounded outside the room. Shayne listened. Mary seemed scared again. Shayne motioned her to silence. He drew his automatic and stepped to the window. A shadow crossed the drawn shade of the window—a shadow with a gun!

VIII

MIKE SHAYNE held his automatic ready, and let the shade snap up.

"Hold it! Right there!" Shayne cried.

The figure of the man with the gun froze in the evening sunlight with his back to Shayne.

"Turn around, slow, and drop the gun," Shayne said.

The man turned. It was John

Senter. For a moment the father of the girl just stood there as pale as death. Then he slowly let his breath out.

"God, Shayne, it's you! I thought it was Tom Acker."

"What are you doing sneaking around with a gun, Senter?"

The father looked down at the pistol in his hand as if a little surprised to find it there. Then he nodded, remembered why he had the gun, and tried to look over my shoulder into the motel room.

"I thought he might be here. Acker! I was going to . . ."

"With a gun?" Shayne said.

"Well—" Senter began, and sighed heavily. "I don't know, Shayne. I don't know what I had in mind. Let's say I was just scared of what that damned kid might do. Is he here?"

"No," Shayne said. "Come on in the front way. And put that pistol on your pocket."

Senter picked up the pistol and put it into his pocket. Shayne left the window and went to open the front door. Senter walked in and saw his daughter still seated on the couch. For a long few seconds they stared at each other. The girl's eyes blazed with anger. Senter's face was contorted with fury.

"Easy," Shayne said.

Senter's face changed first. His voice suddenly tore out in a dry croak and his face went all to pieces with grief, and relief, and joy all at once.

"Mary?" he croaked.

Tears welled in the girl's eyes. "Daddy? I—"

Senter had enough of the real man and father in him to make the first move. He strode to the girl and pulled her up to him. Senter held her and she cried on his shoulder.

"There, there," Senter whispered. "It's all right, Mary. You're all right now. That—"

She half pulled away. "No, Daddy. Tom's a wonderful man. He is, really. You've got him all wrong. He wanted to go to you right away but I was afraid you'd lock me up or send me away! It was my idea to run away."

"All right, baby, all right," Senter said. "We'll talk later. Right now you're safe, and you're coming home."

Mary nodded. "Tom said I should go home and wait for him to come for me."

Senter's face reddened. "Come for you?"

"Yes, Daddy," Mary said quietly. "He said we'd done it wrong, and that next time he would drive up and get me."

Senter laughed a harsh, nasty laugh. "That young bum! I'll be ready for him if he has the nerve—"

Mary pushed Senter, pushed him away, her face white. "Don't you dare touch him, or hurt him! You hear me?"

For a moment Senter seemed

paralyzed with shock. Then his face went from red to white and fast back through red to purple. He raised his hand and stepped toward Mary.

Shayne moved. His big hand caught Senter's wrist.

"Let go! Did you hear . . . ?"

"I heard," Shayne snapped. "She's right, Senter. You don't handle a girl that way. You don't bully any human being. You give them a chance, the kids. Both of them!"

Senter struggled, trying to break Shayne's grip. The furious man swore and sputtered, impotent in Shayne's hands. Mary stood firm and unafraid and just a little contemptuous of her father.

How it would have ended Shayne never knew. As Senter struggled, and he was busy controlling the man, Shayne saw something happen to Mary Senter's eyes. The girl saw something over Shayne's shoulder: something exciting; something she liked seeing. Shayne pushed Senter away and whirled.

Senter went over a chair and sprawled on the floor. Shayne didn't even look at where the man had fallen. He was looking at a big, blond boy of about twenty, with massive shoulders and the arms of a field hand sticking out of a clean white shirt with rolled up sleeves.

"Mary, come on," the boy said.

Shayne didn't move. There was

something wild and manic in the boy's eyes, and there was a big pistol in his hand.

"Tom Acker?" Shayne said.

"Who the hell are you?" Tom Acker said.

Mary Senter said, "He's a private detective, Tom! Dad hired him!"

Tom Acker glared at Shayne. "A detective? You—" The boy stopped. He turned his wild eyes toward Mary Senter. "I changed my mind, Mary. You still want to go with me?"

"Anywhere, Tom," the girl cried eagerly.

"Okay. Come on," Tom Acker said.

Shayne stepped a step toward the boy. Tom Acker moved smoothly, and the gun was aimed straight at Shayne's stomach. Shayne stopped.

"That's not the way, Tom," Shayne said quietly. "You were right the first time. Send her home, and then come for her like a man."

The boy's voice was like a knife. "Who asked you, mister?"

"I know about Rojas, Tom," Shayne said.

Tom Acker didn't even blink. "Who's Rojas, mister?"

"You know who he is. You left him dead on your apartment floor."

The boy's eyes narrowed down so small Shayne could no longer see them in the growing darkness as evening wound into night outside the room.



"Are you working on that, too, mister?" Tom Acker said.

"I am now. Clear it up, boy, then go for Mary right."

Tom Acker seemed to watch Shayne in the gloom as if he were giving it a lot of thought. Mary Senter had her hand up to her mouth again, watching both Tom and Shayne.

"No, maybe it won't clear up," Tom Acker said slowly. "Some things you got to do, Mary?"

The girl started toward the boy. Acker's attention wavered for a moment, the gun went down. Shayne saw even in the dim light that the safety was on! He made his move.

Shayne hurled himself toward the boy just as Mary Senter went close enough to block the free movement of Tom Acker's right hand. Shayne almost had the boy.

From nowhere, John Senter appeared, cursing, to lunge at Tom Acker at the same moment. Shayne hurled into Senter. The father went down again, and Shayne staggered off balance. Inside he swore at Senter. The man had made him miss his opening. Tom Acker stepped backward, the pistol up again, and the safety clicked off ominously.

"Thanks, mister," Tom Acker said. "That tells me how it's got to be. A kid alone's got no chance. You two stay right where you are. I wouldn't kill you, but my old man taught me to shoot, and I'll cripple you."

Shayne stayed where he was. Senter had lost him his one clear chance, and he had a hunch Tom Acker was a kid who would do just what he said.

"Shayne!" Senter cried, staggering up.

"Shut up," Shayne snapped. He said to Acker, "Think it over good, son. This isn't the way. We'll get you."

"Maybe, mister, but this way maybe there's a chance."

The boy and Mary backed off to the door and vanished through it. Senter ran for the door:

"Go ahead, Senter; be brave," Shayne said.

Senter stopped at the door, looked back.

"Damn it, he's just a kid; he won't shoot."

"He's a scared kid, and you

helped make him that. You want to take a chance?"

Senter just stood there, staring at the door.

"He won't get far," Shayne said. "Not without help."

Not far away he heard a car engine start. He pushed Senter aside and opened the door. A small panel truck was pulling away. Shayne saw the number in the fading light.

IX

MIKE SHAYNE sent Senter to police headquarters in Moreton Bay with the story and the license number of the panel truck.

He himself drove straight out to Acker's Fishing Station on The Point. The station was dark and deserted looking. The black compact was still not there. There was no light in the house beside the station.

Shayne parked and walked quietly to the station shack. The door was unlocked. Shayne went in carefully. In the gloom of the now dark night he saw only shadows. At the rear windows he saw no one on the dock, and then he saw that the cabin cruiser was gone.

He had turned to leave when he heard the car drive up and park. He waited. Footsteps sounded on the board walk to the shack. Shayne glided into the shadows as the door opened.

A woman's voice spoke. "Frankie?"

Shayne waited. The woman moved and appeared in the faint light through the windows. She was a small woman, blond and with fine curves.

"Are you here, honey?"

Shayne stepped out. The woman jumped, but she did not run.

"Who are you?" she snapped.

Shayne switched on the light. The woman stared at him. She was well-dressed in a light green sheath that showed all her curves, and her hair shone like gold. But her face had seen a lot of years. She had been beautiful, but she would never see forty again.

"I'm looking for Fred Acker," Shayne said. "Who are you?"

"A fisherman. Don't I look it?" she said, and looked around. "I guess no one's home. Too bad. I was hankering after marlin."

"At night?"

"I'm eccentric," she said.

"Do you know Fred Acker?"

"Sure. Good old Fred. Everybody knows Fred. I didn't hear you say who you were?"

"Shayne," he said. "Mike Shayne. I'm really looking for Tom Acker. Do you know him, too?"

"No," she said. "Well, I guess I can't buy anything here, can I? Nice to have met you."

Shayne watched her leave. He went to the door and his gray eyes followed her with their glance. She crossed the boardwalk back to an

expensive Jaguar sports car, got in and roared away. Shayne stood in the shadows waiting for a time, but no one else came.

The cabin cruiser did not return, even though it was now late for fishing of any kind. The black compact did not come, nor the panel truck. Nothing moved anywhere around the station.

Shayne got into his car and drove back into Miami. It was late. He needed dinner and some sleep.

He got the dinner, and then he dropped in on Tim Rourke in place of the sleep. Rourke was not glad to see him. The lean reporter glowered at Shayne as the redhead sat down in Rourke's small office.

"Some chase you gave me. Troll Products hasn't had any problems beyond how to spend all the money they make in years. Clean as a whistle."

"What about Andy Rojas?" the redhead asked.

"Nothing at all on him here. My contacts in New York say he was a long-time punk, considered to be a first rate man with a car or a boat. The files had him as a possible for a few big jobs, according to the police, but none of them stuck."

"What was his extortion jolt really about?"

The elongated newsman sighed. "A pin-money badger game with some stupid dame who messed it up so bad Rojas took a fall. It looked like just a spur-of-the-

moment caper Rojas got careless about."

Shayne scratched at his stubble. He hadn't had a chance to shave since early morning.

"That's all you have?"

"That's all, Mike. Not much."

Shayne stood up. "Maybe, and maybe not. I'll be in touch, Tim."

He strode out leaving the reporter glaring at the wall. Rourke hated to work on something that did not turn into a good story.

Shayne drove on to Headquarters. He had some luck. Will Gentry was in his office and not tied up. It was harder and harder to get time with the Chief these days, but Gentry was an old friend and had time for Shayne.

The gruff Chief waved Shayne to a chair. "What is it, Mike? That Rojas affair?"

"Yeah."

Gentry chewed on his cigar butt. "Moreton Bay was on to us, too. You working with them?"

"I hope so."

"Pepper's not much, but watch that deputy, Rico. He's a smart boy. What do you want to know?"

"Anything you've got."

Gentry nodded. "I'll skip the pedigree. I expect you know that. The fall Rojas took was a fluke; he was usually slicker than that. A robber, mostly. Driver: getaway cars and all that. He was fingered for a few big jobs before he went away, but nothing came of any of them."

"Tim told me that. Any jobs in particular?"

"Two. The Southgate, New York, bank job back in 1962; and the Newark armored car holdup of 1963. Six men pulled the Southgate robbery, got away clean with two hundred thousand dollars. Four of them are still running somewhere; two are dead."

"And the Newark armored car?"

Gentry scowled. "That's a bigger kettle. A cool one million five hundred thousand dollars in cash. Broad daylight, rubber masks, you know. There were two getaway cars. One turned out to be a decoy. They caught it fast. It was driven by a sixteen-year-old kid who didn't even know who had hired him. He was just paid to be at a certain spot and drive off fast at a certain hour."

"It just happened to be right near the holdup at the exact time?" Shayne said. "Very cute."

"Very. While the cops chased the kid, the other car faded. They never even found the car for a week. There were five men. None were ever found, not even a trace. None of the money ever appeared. No stool pigeons ever whispered. Nothing."

"How did they think about Rojas?"

"Because he was known as an expert on the getaway, and for a funny reason: He'd just done another two years at the time. He'd

only been out two weeks. He'd been a model prisoner for a year, and that wasn't like him. His cellmate said he had plans. So they rousted him, but they couldn't prove anything."

"They never got a lead on any of the others?"

"No, and that's funny as hell. It almost looks like the guys who pulled it had no records, no connections. I'll say one thing: whoever they were they had their getaway planned perfectly, and they also had their hideouts planned perfectly."

"Yeah," Shayne said. "Careful types, not like most big robbery men. Almost like amateurs."

"Except Rojas."

Shayne nodded. "He didn't need the money, though, did he? Not in Auburn. That's one way to lay low for four or five years."

Gentry chewed his cigar. "That's a thought, isn't it?"

"None of them were indicted?"

"Hell, no. There were no names to indict."

"Statute of limitations runs out soon then."

Shayne nodded and stood up.

"Thanks, Will."

Gentry closed one eye and looked at Shayne. "Have I told you anything?"

"I don't know. Right now I need some sleep. Maybe it'll all look different tomorrow."

"Let me know what you come up with, Mike," Gentry said. "I

don't like characters like this punk Rojas coming down here to get killed."

Shayne nodded and left. He drove home to his apartment-hotel and went up the back way. In his living room he had four fingers of Martel and sat looking out the window for some time before he finally sighed and went to bed.

X

MIKE SHAYNE awakened to the realization that he was not alone.

The bedroom was dark. He heard nothing. There was the faintest of gray light through the window in the distance. The city below seemed in that final deep sleep before dawn, the one instant when nothing seems to move.

But Shayne thought only for an instant of all that. He knew someone was in his room. A sense of a hovering presence. He did not move, but his grey eyes slowly glanced around. He saw the faintest of shadows to his right, close to the bed.

He was calculating if he had any chance of reaching the pistol in his nightstand drawer, when the shadow spoke.

"Where is he, Shayne?"

The light beside his bed went on. Shayne blinked in the sudden glare. Then he saw Tom Acker standing at the foot of the bed with his old pistol in his hand. The safety was off this time, and the

boy's finger was white with pressure on the trigger.

"Shayne!" the boy said through clenched teeth.

Shayne watched the boy's eyes, and he tensed to make a lunge the instant Tom Acker fired. It would be the eyes that would tell him when the boy was about to shoot.

"Where is who, Tom?" Shayne said.

The boy made an abrupt gesture of dismissal and contempt.

"They told me. You were chasing him. You lied to me about working to find Mary. You chased my father to the cabin, and there was shooting. Now you've killed him!"

Shayne never took his eyes from the boy's face, or from the whitened finger on the trigger of the old gun. But he moved his hand slowly toward his cigarettes. His voice was low, calm, even.

"I'm going to get a cigarette, Tom. Put the gun down and we can talk. I don't know where your father is, and I assure you I did not kill him."

Tom Acker did not reply. Shayne continued to reach out until he had the packet of cigarettes. He shook one out, lighted it, and returned the pack to the nightstand. Tom Acker watched every movement. Shayne smoked.

"What's it all about, Tom?" Shayne said quietly.

"I'm going to kill you, that's what it's all about."

"Has something happened to your father?"

"You know what happened to my father."

"No, I don't know, Tom."

Tom Acker laughed. It was a vicious laugh. "Why don't you tell the truth! I don't know why you were after my father, or what you want, but you came looking for him and now he's dead!"

"How do you know he's dead, Tom?" Shayne said. "You're acting like you don't know where he is or what happened to him?"

"Smart! That's smart. That's how you figured it, but I know my dad, and I know he's dead. You must be working on some damned scheme with that guy in my apartment! Who was he, Shayne? Did you kill him, too?"

Shayne leaned forward in the bed. "Listen, Tom, I don't know what all this is about, but I do know that you won't solve anything with a gun. Think of Mary, if you won't think of yourself. Where is she, by the way?"

"She's where I want her to be! After I'm finished with you, we're heading out for Brazil. I just want to know where my father is, what you did with his body!"

Shayne continued to lean toward the boy. "Tom, why would I have gone on looking for Mary if I had been out to kill your father? Why go around sticking my neck out by looking for you if I'd killed Rojas in your apartment? No, kid, it



doesn't play, and you know it. Your father shot at me, and I'm damned if I know why."

Tom Acker just stood there for a full minute. To Shayne it seemed like an eternity. The big, muscular boy was trying to see inside Shayne's head. But Shayne breathed faintly easier. The moment of real immediate danger had passed.

"Then who killed him, Shayne?" the boy said. "He had no enemies. He's a quiet guy, and we've lived here all my life. He just runs a fishing station, damn it! Who would kill him? For what?"

"I don't know, Tom. I don't know anything about it, but I do know that Rojas, the dead man, was an ex-con, and he probably didn't come down here alone."

Tom Acker stepped closer, anger deepening on his face again. "An ex-con? What would my father have to do with an ex-con? That sounds like someone you would know! My father—"

Shayne made his move. Tom Acker stepped another step closer,

the gun wavering, and Shayne gathered his muscle and hurled himself straight at the boy.

Tom Acker made the amateur's mistake of stepping back to evade before he attempted to use his weapon. He stumbled, the gun wavered, and Mike Shayne hit him with left arm and shoulder. They went down together in a heap, and the heavy pistol skidded across the floor.

Acker made his second mistake. Instead of using his strength, which was plenty, against Shayne in a man-to-man battle to gain the control, he tried to reach the gun. He grabbed for it, and Shayne hit him once with a murderous short right to the jaw.

The boy slumped, shook his head, tried again for the gun, and Shayne hit him with a combination from his knees.

Tom Acker went out.

Shayne kneeled on the floor for some minutes, breathing heavily.

XI

TOM ACKER sat in a straight chair and his eyes watched Mike Shayne with hate through the glaze that still filled them. Shayne handed the boy a snifter of brandy and sat down facing him. He had his bathrobe on and he held the pistol Tom Acker had pointed at him.

"Go on, drink it," Shayne said. Tom Acker only glared.

"All right," Shayne said, "let's hear the story. Why do you think your father's dead?"

"Go to hell!"

"Probably, I will, but that doesn't help us just now. If I'm going to help you, I have to know the facts. You've got enough trouble for ten men. Senter wants you, the police want you, and maybe someone else wants you, probably dead. Now talk!"

Tom Acker sat white-faced; then his hand suddenly reached out for the brandy. He drained it in one gulp and shuddered as it hit him. Shayne nodded approvingly.

"Go ahead."

Tom Acker hunched forward. "After I left you I went to the cabin at the lagoon. Dad wasn't there. I was going home when I found his jacket at the edge of the lagoon. It was bloody. It had two bullet holes in it.

"I drove down the river and I found the outboard stuck on a mud flat, empty. There was blood in it, too. So I went on home. Dad wasn't there. There was no message. The cruiser is gone."

Shayne watched the boy. "So you figured someone had killed him, and you heard I'd been looking for him."

"Yes. I—"

"Okay, natural, but I was looking for you and Mary. Now tell me about Rojas."

"I don't know anything about him."

"He was killed in your apartment."

"I don't know anything!"

"Who has keys to your place?" Tom Acker sat silent.

Shayne swore: "Damn it, boy, you need help! I want to help. You have to trust me. You've got no choice."

Tom Acker looked at the empty glass. Shayne went for the bottle. He poured a stiff jolt for Acker, and one for himself. He drank his and waited. The boy drank his down quickly.

"Dad has the keys, no one else," Tom Acker said very low. He raised his eyes. "Mr. Shayne, I really don't know anything about this Rojas. Dad and I have lived at the station all my life. He was never involved in anything illegal. We work the station and the boat. About a year ago Dad suggested it was time I had a place of my own. It was his idea, not mine."

"Did he say why?"

"Just that a grown man should have his own place. We still worked together like always. I've been studying marine biology, and I'm pretty good. Dad liked that. He said he'd send me to college soon, or anywhere I wanted to go. There's a special school down in Brazil for marine biology work. I've got an offer to go if I can get enough money to live on for a couple of years while I'm studying."

"Okay. Now about Rojas. When you found him you ran out."

Tom Acker nodded. "I was afraid. I'd seen this Rojas out at the station talking to Dad. Dad didn't know I'd seen him. He never mentioned the man. But I could see that he was worried. He said maybe I ought to go to Brazil right away. He'd pay. So—"

"So you got Mary out of school to talk it over?"

"That's right. I want her to come with me, marry me. Anyway, I got her and we talked it all over. I guess she told you all about that, and about what we did after we found Rojas."

"She did. Did anyone else see your father with Rojas?"

"Mrs. Calder did."

"Who's she?"

"An old friend of Dad's. His sweetheart, I guess. Anyway, she's always been close to him. She came to the station right after Dad met Rojas and I could hear her tell him about Rojas. Only Dad already knew."

"All right. Now what you're saying is that no one has seen your father since I did yesterday?"

"I can't find anyone who did."

"So it adds up to him vanishing after I showed up, and after I tailed him to that cabin and he took some shots at me."

Tom Acker nodded. "I guess so."

"And you don't have any idea what he was so worried about? He didn't shoot at me for practice. He didn't want me after him."

"I don't know why."

Shayne rubbed at his stubble. "Was there anyone else looking for him, Tom? Think carefully."

"No, no one."

"Did your father ever say anything, hint at anything, that might have given you the idea he had some secret?"

"No, never."

"And he's never been away from The Point?"

"Only on fishing trips. He used to take parties out for days, go over toward Cuba. He hasn't done that in a while."

"You didn't go on those trips?"

"Not the long ones, I was too young. School and all that."

Shayne considered. Long fishing trips. Out on the sea where a boat could go anywhere. Cuba?

"All right, Tom. Let's go and see if we can find your father."

The boy just sat, his eyes on the floor. "He's dead, Mr. Shayne. I know that. Dad was not a soft man. He would fight, and that jacket didn't get bloody by accident."

Shayne stood up and his gray eyes were hard. "I won't lie to you, boy. You're a man now. Maybe your father is dead. Rojas was no boy scout, and your father was scared about something. But if he is dead we'll find who killed him and why. Right?"

Tom Acker looked up. "Yes, right."

"No matter what reason we find, and it may not be so good."

"No matter what, Mr. Shayne." Shayne nodded and went to dress.

XII

IN THE GROWING morning Mike Shayne again drove up the highway toward Moreton Bay. The case was getting grim. It wasn't a runaway girl any longer. For most of the first miles Tom Acker sat silent, as if having second thoughts.

"Tell me where Mary is, Tom," Shayne said.

No matter what the case had become, Mary Senter was still his main concern.

"She's in another motel. In Moreton Bay. She's okay, Mr. Shayne. No one but me knows who she is."

"Half the police of the county are looking for her."

"They won't find her. Friends of mine run that motel. They'd do anything for Dad or me."

They reached Moreton Bay while the town was just waking up. Shayne stopped in the fishing station shack to call Senter. No one was at the shack. Tom Acker waited for Shayne to finish his call, as if the boy were afraid to go over to the house alone.

Senter was in a stew. "Have you found her, Shayne?"

"No," Shayne said. It was the truth if not the whole truth. "I'm still looking. Don't worry; she'll be all right. I don't suppose you or

your wife have seen Fred Acker?"

"No, and if I do—"

"Take it easy, Senter. There looks like there may be more to this than you think, but Mary will be okay. And you better do some serious thinking about a son-in-law."

Shayne hung up before Senter could answer that. He walked out of the shack with Tom Acker, and together they crossed the catwalks to the house.

Tom Acker went in first, slowly as if afraid he would find his father.

The house was a mess. There were only three rooms downstairs, and all three had been searched by someone who worked as neatly as a hurricane. Tables were smashed, upholstery was ripped open, and the rugs had been flung back. Each closet had been emptied, the clothes thrown out onto the floor.

Shayne could see where the walls had been probed with some sharp instrument.

They went upstairs and it was the same. Even the storage attic had been pulled apart.

"Someone wanted something very badly," Shayne said, "and something fairly bulky, from the look of where he searched. Is there a basement?"

"Yes."

"Let's see it."

Tom Acker led him down again and to a narrow set of stairs that

led into a dark basement. The boy turned the lights on. There were no windows in the basement, but it had been searched too. Even the washing machine had been turned over, and holes were dug in the concrete floor.

Tom Acker stared around. "What could it be, Mr. Shayne? Dad hasn't been anywhere in twenty years! What could be so important they had to kill Dad? For what?"

"I don't know, Tom, but whatever it is someone wants it bad."

"I've lived in this house all my life! Nothing could be hidden here!"

Tom Acker sat on the overturned washing machine and let his eyes glance all around the dank basement. The boy kept shaking his head. The sight of the searched house seemed to have depressed him even more. Shayne could guess why—someone was really interested in Fred Acker.

"I don't think anything was hidden here," Shayne said slowly, looking around, too. "The search is too complete. If whatever it is had been found, the search would have ended somewhere in a hurry, a sharp stop. No, nothing was found here."

"Is that good?"

"At least it means that the killer, or killers, didn't get any information from your father. He didn't tell whoever it is what he wanted to know."

"Dad wouldn't tell under pressure. I've seen him smile with an engine block on his leg."

Shayne nodded. "Which means that maybe he's still alive. If anyone wants something this much, and thinks your father knows where it is, it wouldn't be smart to kill him before getting the information."

"But what?"

"I don't know yet. Maybe your father doesn't really know. Maybe it's something he brought into the country, or was supposed to take out."

"Take out?" the boy said, staring.

Shayne nodded. "You said your father told you he would back you with money, and he got you out of the house, didn't he? It's possible he became involved in some deal this last year, a quick-money job, and something went wrong, and your father knows where the thing he was handling is."

"Why not just hand it over, then?"

"Maybe the people looking are not the same people who gave it to your father," Shayne said grimly. "But right now I think it's time I got to the police. You haven't told them about your father, about the jacket?"

"No. I—I went after you."

"All right. You stay right here, you understand? Stay away from Mary. It's possible whoever is after your father has an eye on you

too. Lock the place up and stay put."

"All right," the boy agreed.

They went back upstairs and Shayne went out to his car. He got in and lighted a cigarette. He watched the house for a moment. He wondered if Tom Acker were telling the whole story? Maybe the boy was involved in the deal up to his neck.

Shayne started the engine, and he reminded himself grimly that he wasn't telling the boy the whole truth, either. He wanted the police to help, yes, but it was more than possible that Fred Acker had been shot—by the police!

The older man had been running fast and violent when Shayne had last seen him in that outboard motorboat.

XIII

MIKE SHAYNE parked in front of Moreton Bay Police Headquarters. He felt like he'd been up for hours, but it was only just past nine o'clock. Inside they told him that Chief Pepper was not in yet, but Deputy Rico was. Rico had looked like a man who kept long hours.

Shayne found the deputy seated in his small office with his booted feet up and a mug of coffee in his hand. Rico waved Shayne to a chair.

"This Rojas turned out to be an interesting boy," Rico said, and cocked an eye at Shayne. "Or did

you know that already? I mean, with your connections?"

"I know it already," Shayne said.

"Any luck finding the girl and young Acker?"

"Not yet," Shayne lied. "At least not the girl."

Rico swung a foot down from the desk. "Meaning you found the boy?"

"He found me," Shayne said.

He told Rico all that had happened, and all that Tom Acker had told him. Rico listened carefully. When Shayne told about leaving Tom alone in the house, Rico closed his eyes and sighed, but he put his foot back on top of his desk and sipped at his coffee.

"So it looks like Fred Acker got himself killed?"

"It looks that way," Shayne admitted. It did, no matter what he had told Tom.

"Body's probably in the river or the ocean. It won't show for a while, maybe never. We've got some heavy tides around here."

"Convenient," Shayne said.

Rico opened one eye. He considered Mike Shayne for a time. "You say the house was all torn up? So someone's after something. The question is: did Fred Acker know what it was, or was he maybe just in the way?"

"Or maybe he stumbled onto something," Shayne pointed out.

Rico nodded. "That, too. You know, Moreton Bay wasn't always

what it is now. Back in the thirties it was a small town with a lot going on. Plenty of smuggling, booze, you name it, coming in from Cuba. Out on The Point there was a kind of Italian colony that had a way of staying to itself. In fact, right where Acker built his station used to be the sort of community dock and equipment center."

"Maybe something was hidden there and Acker didn't even know it? But he was in the way?"

"Could be," Rico said. "What don't figure though is how Rojas ended up dead on the boy's floor if the Ackers aren't tied into it. Unless Rojas just thought they were, got tough, and one of them killed him. Old Fred's got a hell of a temper. He's not all he seems to be."

"Meaning?"

Rico emptied his coffee cup and squeezed the mug in his hands. "Fred Acker is a good citizen, or was, but he was a tough man, and no angel. He took good care of that boy, brought him up clean, but Tom doesn't know all about his father."

"Enemies? Local?"

"He had enemies," Rico said. The deputy set his coffee mug carefully down on the desk. "Acker was a man who liked women, Shayne. He wasn't always careful about the circumstances, either. He had more than his share of fights with husbands. For all his quiet ways, Fred wasn't an easy



man to understand. And maybe there's just a little more going on than meets the eye."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning I did a little snooping and it turns out that young Tom Acker met Mary Senter when John Senter took her fishing on Fred Acker's boat. Did Senter mention that he knew Fred Acker?"

"No, he didn't."

Rico nodded. "Fred was playing footsie with a woman around The Point. June Taylor is married, and Max Taylor is a rough man. Then there were rumors that Fred was seeing some married woman in town."

Shayne watched Rico. "You're thinking about Gladys Senter?"

"Yeah, I'm thinking about her. You know, Tom Acker's a pretty good kid. I wonder just a little about why the Sinters are so set against him."

Shayne thought for a time. "Who's the small blonde, kind of well-built, named Mrs. Calder?"

"Sally Calder?" Rico said. "No one knows much about her. She showed up here about five years ago, and she's no small-town woman. She seems to have some money, but she keeps pretty much to herself. Fred Acker was about her only real friend. I'm damned if I know if it was a romance or not. She's a sporting type, likes fishing."

Shayne watched the traffic on the main street outside Rico's windows. The sun was growing hot, and the flies were buzzing industriously in the silent office.

Shayne rubbed at his gaunt jaw.

"You're saying there may be some other motive for killing Acker? That someone is looking around hard may be only a coincidence?"

"It's something to think about."

"Maybe, but what about Rojas? You figure it was a coincidence he was found in Tom Acker's apartment?"

"That's a stumbler, yeah," Rico agreed. "It's funny, but we've been checking pretty close on Rojas, and he doesn't seem to have known exactly who he did want. He was asking around town after two or three

men, all different names and descriptions. None of them seem to fit anyone we know."

"All men?"

"Yeah. You thinking about Sally Calder?"

"She only came here five years ago."

"That's right. I maybe ought to look into that."

Shayne stood up. "I think I'll see what the Sinters have to say."

"All right," Rico drawled, "and maybe you better tell Tom Acker to come in and see us. I mean, we got a few little questions for him, you know?"

"I'll tell him," Shayne said.

But as he left he realized what Gentry had meant about Deputy Rico. A shrewd man. They were playing it quietly, but Rico had by no means ruled out Tom Acker as a possible murderer. Shayne figured he had to work fast.

He did not go to Senter's house, no matter what he had told Rico. He stopped and looked up the address of Mrs. Sally Calder in the telephone book. Then he drove to the blonde's house.

It turned out to be another ranch-style house, modest but not cheap, and in a quiet section of Moreton Bay. Shayne parked some distance up the street and walked toward the house. He could see that the shades in the house were all drawn.

He did not see the man who stepped out of the bushes behind

him. He felt the gun barrel in his back.

"Keep walking," a harsh voice said quietly. "Don't turn around, don't try anything brave. There's a gray sedan around the first corner. Get in behind the wheel."

Shayne walked past Sally Calder's house and turned the corner toward the gray sedan.

XIV

MIKE SHAYNE sat on the floor of the empty room and faced a split and decaying wall. The shack was out in the marshes but a long way from where Fred Acker had vanished. The shack was as barren as an abandoned Army barrack, and Shayne sat with his hands tied behind him.

His captor was somewhere behind him, unseen. Shayne had not seen the man since he had been captured. Now the harsh voice spoke in the same quiet, casual manner from behind him.

"Now, mister, tell me the whole story. Start with what happened to Andy Rojas."

"I don't know what happened to Rojas."

The gun slapped his head, lightly, but it made his ears ring and his teeth rattle.

"Tell me, mister."

"I don't know a damn thing about Rojas."

"I've been watching you, mister."

"Then you haven't seen me do anything that says I know about Rojas."

There was a silence. Shayne could hear the harsh breathing of the man.

"All right. Start with where the stuff is, or where Frankie is."

"Frankie?" Shayne said.

The gun slapped his head again. Shayne gritted his teeth. The man behind him sighed wearily.

"Come on, mister. All I want is a little help. I know the stuff wasn't in the house, or on the boat. I know Andy didn't get it."

"I guess your Frankie got it. Frankie what, by the way?"

"Frankie Jenks, mister, as if you didn't know. Sure Frankie's got it, but he wouldn't be dumb enough to carry it on him. I figure it got to be around here somewhere, though."

"You looked."

"Sure, only I didn't find. Now you're tight with the boy, right? You got to be in the know."

"Wrong," Shayne said. "The boy doesn't know a damn thing. I guess only Fred Acker himself knows anything, if anyone around here does. You shouldn't have killed Acker."

There was a sudden, hovering silence as if the man behind him had suddenly stood up and was trying to decide just how he was going to kill Shayne. But when the man spoke again there was no change in his harsh, quiet voice.

"You think Acker got killed, mister?"

"Yes," Shayne said. "I think he got killed. Maybe by you, maybe by this Frankie you're looking for. I guess this is a real big double-cross all around."

The man made a sound. "You think Frankie Jenks killed Fred Acker? That's what you're telling me, mister?"

"Unless you did, it sounds like a good guess."

"A good guess, huh? Mister, it's one real swell guess."

Shayne tensed, waited, and then he heard movement. He braced. The movement was footsteps going away. Light played through the bare shack.

"So long, mister," the voice said. "Keep your nose clean."

The door closed. Shayne waited. He heard a car engine start. Then he heard the car pull away. He began to work on his bonds. They were well tied, but not intended to hold him forever. He turned around and surveyed the shack.

There was nothing in it, but there were many loose boards with nails sticking out. He stood up and walked to where a long nail stuck out of the wall, turned, and went to work on the ropes around his wrists.

Twenty minutes later, his wrists scratched and bleeding, he broke the ropes and quickly removed the last of the bonds. He went out into the sun and saw that this cabin

was on another small river, with a narrow dirt road leading away left and right. He decided that the direction of the sea would probably be the shortest way out. He began to walk.

An hour later he stood on the secondary highway. After a time a truck picked him up and took him into Moreton Bay. He got a taxi and had it take him back to where he had left his car. He paid the driver. His car was still where he had left it. He started once more for Sally Calder's house.

The small blonde answered the door herself. She seemed older in the daylight, and her eyes didn't look at Shayne, they looked over his shoulder and all around behind him as if she expected to see someone else. Whoever she expected was not someone she wanted to see. She was nervous.

"Hello, Mrs. Calder," Shayne said. "Still like night fishing?"

She laughed. She was a tough woman who might have been nervous, but who did not panic.

"Still like night fishing," she said. "Only now I know the kind of fishing you do. What's on your mind, Mr. Shayne?"

"Just like that? Tom thinks his father has been killed."

"I've been around shamus-types before, and maybe Tom's right. So what?"

"Do we stand here like targets?" Shayne said.

He watched Sally Calder, and

she jumped imperceptibly, but Shayne saw the faint movement. Her eyes darted around again, and she stepped back and waved him inside.

In an elegant living room he sat down and studied the woman. She remained standing.

"Do you think Fred Acker is dead?"

"I don't know. It sounds like it."

"Do you know why someone would kill him?"

"No, but I don't know Fred that well."

"What about Rojas? Did you know Andy Rojas well?"

"I never heard of the man," Sally Calder said.

"What did Rojas say he wanted when he talked to you?"

"He didn't. He just asked for Fred Acker."

"Then he knew you were friendly with Acker?"

"Everyone in Moreton Bay knows that."

"Just how friendly were you, Mrs. Calder?"

"None of your damned business," she flared.

"Tom says you were Fred's sweetheart."

She laughed. "Did he? The boy's a square in a lot of ways. Sweetheart? Hell, I haven't heard that word for twenty years. Let's say Fred and I were good friends, but he liked younger types here and there."

"Like Mrs. June Taylor?"

She nodded. "Yeah, like June Taylor."

"Maybe Gladys Senter?"

"Who the hell is Gladys Senter?"

Shayne watched her. She seemed honestly surprised. "Okay, let that pass. How long have you known Acker?"

"A long time."

"Since before you came here?" Shayne snapped.

She didn't answer. She just stood there for a time and looked at Shayne. Then she took out a cigarette from a box on a table and lighted it.

"I met Fred when I came here. Anything else, Mr. Shayne, or can you let me take my shower now?"

Shayne nodded, and stood up. "Okay, I guess that's all. Except one thing. Who's Frankie?"

"Frankie?" she said. She smoked but her hand shook. "What Frankie?"

"Last night when you came into Acker's fishing station you called for Frankie. That wouldn't be Frankie Jenks, would it?"

"No!"

She spat it out. Sudden and explosive. She spat it out much too quickly.

"I wonder," Shayne said. "Someone killed Fred Acker, Mrs. Calder. Now there's a very professional type gunman around here looking for Acker and Frankie Jenks. This professional type knew Rojas, and he knows Frankie

Jenks. He wants to know where Jenks is. There was talk of double-cross."

She was pale. "A gunman?"

"The smooth type with a voice like raw sandpaper but quiet. Maybe you know him, too?"

"No! she snapped too quickly again. "I don't know any of these people."

"Not even Frankie? Come on, Mrs. Calder."

She stubbed out her cigarette. "All right, out! Get out of here right now."

Shayne stood there for a moment and their eyes clashed in the shaded living room. Then the red-head nodded and walked out. He went up the street, his eyes open this time, and got into his car.

He drove away, but he did not drive far.

XV

MIKE SHAYNE slid to a stop around the corner and jumped out of his car. He left the engine running.

He worked his way rapidly back to Sally Calder's house by way of the front yards. He used the bushes and trees of the good neighborhood as cover. When he reached a point from where he had a clear view of Sally Calder's garage, he crouched down out of sight and waited.

After some ten minutes, the side door of the house opened. Sally

Calder came out. She walked swiftly, and she was carrying a large brown paper bag. The bag seemed heavy.

Shayne watched her get into her car and start the engine. Then he turned and sprinted back through the front yards to where he had left his car.

He jumped in and made a quick U-turn.

As he turned back into the road that passed Sally Calder's house, he saw her black Jaguar going away fast in the opposite direction. He gunned his motor and went after her.

He caught up to a decent distance just as she went up an entrance ramp onto the main highway and turned north. Shayne fell in line just far enough back to not be seen. It was not easy. He had to follow too close in the heavy noon traffic. If he did not follow close he would lose her almost certainly.

She drove some three miles on the highway until she was out of Moreton Bay and into the marshy area north of the town. Then she hit an off-ramp. Shayne almost missed his lane, but he made it in time to spot her turning into a secondary road that led east toward the ocean.

After another mile, when Shayne could smell the sea, she turned into a dirt road. Shayne had to let her get a little ahead, and then turned into the dirt road after

her. She was out of sight around a sharp curve.

Shayne gunned his car and went after her—and less than three hundred yards from the start of the dirt road it ended abruptly at another paved secondary road.

Sally Calder's car had vanished.

Shayne swore at himself. Obviously the woman had known about this tricky dirt road, and just as obviously she had spotted him following her. He had been suckered neatly. There was nothing he could do now but go back and start somewhere else.

He turned the car back for the highway and drove into Moreton Bay. He looked up the address of Max Taylor.

The Taylor house was a shabby stucco cottage in a rundown section of Moreton Bay between The Point and the main part of town. The section looked like it had been forgotten by anything but the welfare people, and Taylor's house looked like its owners didn't care if anyone ever remembered it.

He parked and rang the bell. A big, glowering man in a dirty undershirt answered.

"What do you want?"

"Max Taylor?"

"Yeah," the man said suspiciously, and looked over Shayne's shoulder as if expecting to see a trick.

"My name's Shayne," Shayne said. "I want to talk to you."

"About what, buddy?"



"Fred Acker."

The man cursed, spat and started to close the door. Shayne stuck his foot in the opening and grinned.

"Get your foot out!" Max Taylor said.

"Tell me about Fred Acker, Max," Shayne said.

The big man swung a hard right. Shayne stepped inside, blocked, and sank a short right into Taylor's stomach. Taylor sat down on the floor inside the door, his eyes glazed, gasping for breath. A woman laughed.

"He's always biting off too much," the woman said. "That's a nice punch you've got, Red."

She was a tall woman going to fat but still with a lot to make a man chase after her. Her eyes were bright blue and they were eyes that told Shayne that she would not run away very fast if the right man chased her. Shayne guessed that almost any man who could walk was the right man.

"Mrs. Taylor?"

"That's right, Red. Come on into my parlor."

On the floor Max Taylor had recovered his breath, and had acquired a little late caution with it. He struggled up and stood beside his wife.

"Shut up, stupid. He's asking after Fred Acker."

June Taylor's friendly inviting grin faded. She snarled;

"Fred Acker to hell! Big-mouthed liars, everyone who says I had anything to do with Fred Acker! You listen to me, mister. Maybe I had a drink or two with Fred Acker, but that's all."

Max Taylor echoed, "That's all. Everybody got a rotten mind, you hear?"

Shayne considered them. It was pretty clear that they had heard about Fred Acker. They had closed ranks and he was not going to get much out of them. At the same time, they were nervous about something.

"Where were you the last few days, Taylor?"

"Out on my boat."

"You're a fisherman?"

"That's right. I run a charter boat. I just got back in this morning."

"And you?" Shayne asked June Taylor.

"I been right here at home!"

"You've both known Fred Acker a long time?"

"Too long," Taylor snapped.

"You wouldn't happen to know a man named Frankie Jenks, would you?"

"Hell, no."

"You can handle a boat. Acker's boat is missing."

"So it's missing? Hell, Acker takes it up the coast to that shack of his sometimes. He's about the only guy can get a boat that big up that river."

June Taylor said, "You ask that Calder woman about Fred getting killed. She and him been thick as thieves since she got here."

"You know a man named Rojas?"

"You mean that out-of-towner got killed?" Taylor said. "No, but I'll tell you this: Fred Acker used to take some damned strange guys out on his boat. I ain't sure but what this Rojas was one of them about five years ago. There was something about the picture Deputy Rico showed me."

"All right," Shayne said. "Thanks for helping."

"Get lost," Taylor said.

Shayne grinned at the man, who had only just begun to get some of his belligerence back. He left and went back to his car. He was beginning to get some ideas.

He drove from Taylor's house to the Acker Fishing Station. There were some more questions he wanted to ask Tom Acker, and he also wanted to get Tom to send Mary Senter home. With a man like the harsh-voiced gunman around, Shayne wanted Mary out of it, and he figured Tom Acker would agree.

Shayne looked in at the fishing station shack and found it still empty. Then he walked over to the house. He saw nothing that made him know Tom Acker was there, which was good. Then he saw the front door open. That was not good.

He walked faster and went inside.

"Tom?!"

There was no answer. Shayne hurried through the rooms until he reached a small rear room.

Tom Acker lay on the floor. He had been tied to a chair, and someone had used matches on his feet as well as fists on his face. Shayne bent down over the boy.

Tom Acker was still alive, but not much more.

XVI

AT THE Moreton Bay hospital the doctors worked for some time, and then they came out and reported that Tom Acker was not in serious shape but was not in the pink, either.

"Did he say anything?" Deputy Rico said.

"No, not to us. He wants to talk to Mr. Shayne."

Rico said, "We'll both talk to him."

"All right," the doctor said, "but remember that he's been beaten, and the shock from his feet is severe. He can talk, but strong as he is he shouldn't talk too long."

The doctor took them into the room where Tom Acker lay swathed in facial bandages, and with his bandaged feet sticking out of the covers like two white dolls. Rico bent over him.

"You know who did it, Tom?"

The boy shook his bandaged head.

Shayne said, "Can you talk, Tom?"

"Yeah," the boy whispered. "One man. He wore a mask. He beat on me. He used matches. He kept asking where it was."

The boy stopped as if the effort of speech was almost too much for him. His face was completely hidden by the bandages. His chest heaved in the effort of breathing.

"Where is it? . . . Where is it? . . . That's all he said. Over and over! Where is what? What do they want? Who wants it?"

Rico and Shayne looked at each other. Tom Acker lay back silent, breathing hard.

Shayne bent over him again. "What about Mary, Tom?"

"I don't know. I didn't say nothing. He didn't ask."

"You better tell us where she is now," Shayne said. "We have to protect her."

The boy nodded. "She's at The Barracuda Motel. Rico knows where it is. Ask for Mrs. Thomas. That'll prove you come from me, and they'll let you get to her."

"Okay, Tom," Shayne said.

Tom Acker moved on the bed.

"He just hit me, over and over. I didn't know what he wanted."

"Easy," Shayne said.

"Can you tell us anything about him?" Rico said.

Tom Acker shrugged. "He—he had a funny voice. Rough but low."

Shayne recognized the description. It had been the gunman who has questioned him. Only in his case the man had not gone to such extremes.

"Take it easy, Tom," Shayne said. "We'll find him. You get some rest."

Out in the hospital corridor Mike Shayne lit a cigarette angrily. Rico watched him. The eyes of the deputy were wary with speculation.

"What do you think, Shayne?" Rico asked.

"I think someone wants something very badly, and doesn't have it yet. It looks like Acker's dead, the way this gunman operates, but whatever is causing it all hasn't been found."

"So?"

"So why is Acker dead? You know?" Shayne said. "I mean, from that jacket Tom found it looks like Acker was shot and dumped into a river. He wasn't tortured, from the sound of it, and he didn't talk. So why was he shot?"

Rico nodded. "Why kill him before finding the stuff, right? Yeah, I'm thinking about that myself. It could be what I said before—Acker got killed for some other rea-

son than whatever these guys are looking for."

Shayne nodded. "It could be. Only I don't like it. Too damned much coincidence. Fred Acker was worried about me, and all I was doing was nosing around. It almost looks like I made Acker do something."

"You and Rojas," Rico said. "It got to be that Rojas was after Acker, too. Or at least after something he thought Acker had or knew about."

"And Mrs. Calder is in it somewhere," Shayne said. "When she heard about the gunman she reacted. And she was carrying that package when she lost me."

"You think she has what they want?"

"It could be, or it could be nothing."

"Maybe a bag of groceries," Rico said.

"Anything," Shayne said.

The two men fell silent. Shayne was wondering about the Sinters. Somehow the actions of Tom Acker and Mary Senter seemed to be part of the whole mess. Why had Rojas been killed at Tom's apartment, and by whom?

Rico sighed. "Well, I better get back to work. We're still looking for Acker's body; it might give us a clue."

"I'll go and pick up Mary Senter and take her home," Shayne said. "I think you better see if you can find Sally Calder, too."

"And that gunman," Deputy Rico said.

They parted, and Shayne drove to The Barracuda Motel. He asked for Mrs. Thomas, and after a certain amount of explaining, the motel manager, a friend of Tom Acker's, sent him back to a unit.

Mary Senter was there, scared and nervous. When she saw Mike Shayne, she paled.

"How did—"

"Tom's been hurt," Shayne said bluntly. He explained what had happened. "I'll drive you home, Mary. Tom can't help you now for a time. If you're both mature enough he'll come for you, and you'll be ready, and your parents will understand."

"Will they?" she said bitterly.

Shayne rubbed at his jaw. "Mary, do you know if your mother or father had any relations with Fred Acker in the past?"

"No, I don't think so. I didn't know Mr. Acker very well myself. He was a—well, a quiet man."

"Okay. Get your things."

Mary got her few things and they went out to Shayne's car. The redhead drove her toward her house. Mary was silent. Shayne was thinking.

"Did anything happen recently, Mary? I mean, with Tom and his father? Tom said something about his father backing him with help."

"Yes, Mr. Acker wanted Tom to have his chance to go down to Brazil. He said he wished the chance

had waited, but Tom had to have his chance."

Shayne drove. He remembered that Acker had said something like that to him. Somewhere, time was important in this: Tom Acker's need for money, Andy Rojas's release from prison. But he could not quite put his finger on it.

They reached the Senter house, and Shayne took the girl in. John Senter was at work, but Gladys Senter was there. She fell all over the girl, who did not respond. Gladys Senter's face darkened. Shayne stepped in.

"Why don't you get some rest, Mary?" Shayne said.

Mary agreed. "I am tired."

After the girl had gone, Shayne turned to Gladys Senter.

"Leave her alone for a time, Mrs. Senter," he said. "Treat her right, as an adult, and maybe you'll still have a daughter. Push her too hard and you'll lose her."

"Don't you tell me—"

"I'll tell you the truth," Shayne snapped. "I've done my job, and brought her home. But that's the least of it. Listen to her; try to understand what she wants. If you try to bully her you'll lose her all the way."

Gladys Senter glared at Shayne, but she said nothing more. Shayne nodded.

"That's better. They've been through a lot. Tom Acker's in the hospital. He's a tough kid."

"Hospital?" Gladys Senter said.

Shayne watched her. "You wouldn't know anything about what happened to Fred Acker, would you?"

"Of course not. I hardly know the man."

"Someone beat Tom half to death trying to find out where something was, something they wanted very badly."

"And you want Mary to be involved with—"

"Mary will do what she wants to do eventually," Shayne said. "Right now I want you to be careful and let no one in—you don't know. There's no telling who they might think—"

Shayne stopped. The redhead heard his own words, and he turned on his heel and walked out to his car.

In the car he drove toward police headquarters.

The rough-voiced gunman had been looking for something. He had tortured Tom Acker. But he had abruptly stopped working on Shayne after a few light taps with the pistol.

Shayne realized the exact point when the gunman had walked out and left him. When he had said he thought that the other unknown man, Frankie Jenks, had killed Fred Acker.

XVII

IN THE DARKNESS of the marsh nothing seemed to move except

some nocturnal birds out looking for prey.

Here and there things splashed in the lagoon and in the small river, furtive things unseen in the night.

Shayne crouched in the mangrove thicket and watched the silent cabin where Fred Acker had shot at him, and where Acker's bloody jacket had been found.

Deputy Rico and his men were crouched all around in the night, with Rico himself beside Shayne. The black compact car still stood where it had been left and the lagoon stretched empty and silver in the night.

Shayne's legs grew cramped, and Rico stood up every now and then to stretch his legs. Nothing happened for a long time.

Somewhere not far off the throb of deep engines hummed in the night and seemed to grow closer. Then there was silence again.

It was past one before anyone came. Then a car engine stopped somewhere, and ten minutes later a small, slender man appeared in the open moonlight near the cabin. He wore a dark topcoat, and there was a pistol in his hand. He seemed to move without touching the ground.

Rico touched Shayne, and the redhead shook his head.

"No," Shayne whispered.

Rico subsided. In the open moonlight the thin man stood for some moments as if listening. He seemed to be watching the deserted

lagoon. He looked around slowly and carefully, and then he seemed to vanish, so expertly did he move. He glided away into the bushes not far from the cabin.

"Now?" Rico asked. "That's got to be your gunman."

"Yeah," Shayne said. "But we wait."

Another ten minutes passed like frozen molasses. Then there was movement out on the lagoon. A small boat appeared from nowhere. Two figures were in the boat, with one of them rowing. The boat glided into shore near the cabin and the two people got out. One was a small blonde woman.

"Calder," Rico hissed.

Shayne nodded. He was watching Sally Calder and the man with her. The man's face was obscured in the night. They did not go toward the cabin, but moved the other way toward a thick clump of cypresses. Then Shayne saw that the man was carrying a long canvas bundle.

The two stopped in the grove of cypresses, and the man began to dig. He dug for some time, nothing else moving in the darkness, no sound but the steady sound of the digging. The ground was soft and the man dug rapidly.

Then the man tossed the shovel away and jumped down into the hole. The woman bent over, eager. The man climbed back out of the hole with a large box in his hands. The pair did not stop to examine the box, but began to walk straight



back to the small boat without even bringing the tools.

The thin man in the topcoat stepped out of the trees. He had his pistol pointed at the pair. He did not fire. His rough, low voice reached to where Shayne and Rico crouched.

"Going somewhere, Frankie?"

Sally Calder gave a small cry. The man with her stopped in his tracks. His free hand moved.

"No, Frankie!" the rough-voiced little man said. "Just freeze and hand it over."

The thin man stepped closer to the man with the box, the man he had called Frankie.

Shayne and Rico came out of the mangroves.

"All of you hold it right there!" Rico cried out.

"You're all covered," Shayne snapped.

The thin man jumped as if bitten, and his pistol wavered. He did not seem to know for a second which way to aim the gun.

The man Frankie took the chance, and his free hand snaked into his jacket pocket. He dropped the box and pushed Sally Calder to the ground.

The night suddenly seemed to explode in sound.

No one, later, was sure who had fired first. The thin man's gun fired. The man Frankie fired. Rico fired. Rico's men began to shoot from the bushes. Shayne went down on his face, firing as he fell.

The blasting rose to a crescendo for a matter of seconds. Then there was silence.

Shayne slowly stood up. Rico was on his feet, looking around. Rico's men came out of the bushes.

The thin gunman in the topcoat lay on his back. His eyes were wide and blank. He was dead.

Sally Calder moaned with a bullet in the leg. One of Rico's men gave her a cigarette, and she sat on the ground swearing.

None of the police had been hit.

The man who had dug up the box crawled on the ground, leaving a trail of blood. He crawled slowly, like a dying lion, to a tree and sat with his back against the tree, his chest a mass of blood, and his eyes almost closed with pain.

"Cigarette," the man said, and

looked at Shayne. "I knew you was going to be trouble."

Shayne bent and gave the man a cigarette. It was Fred Acker: a dying Fred Acker. Shayne lit the cigarette.

"Thanks," Acker said, and his pain-wracked eyes looked toward the box that was abandoned on the marshy ground. "All there, in the box. The whole one million, five hundred thousand dollars—cash. I—I thought I could get away with it."

"The Newark armored car hold-up five years ago?" Shayne asked.

Acker nodded. "There were five of us. Rojas, Randy Kann over there, me, and two more. We were going to lay low five years plus and then split. I was supposed to take the loot up to New York a month ago. I figured to try and keep it all. I didn't know anyone knew where I was."

"You're real name's Frankie Jenks?"

"Yeah. Double identity, you know? Good cover. I'd pulled other jobs, but the Newark caper was the big one."

"You wanted to help Tom get ahead? Give him money?"

Acker, alias Frankie Jenks, nodded. "After he got tight with this Mary girl. Only Rojas showed up and I had to kill him. Then Kann came down."

"When you pulled a job you just went out on your boat, and then docked it up here, and went north?"

"That's it, a good scheme. The boat's hidden over the other side of the lagoon. No one knew you could bring a boat that big up here." Acker said the last almost proudly. "I was just off fishing, and no one ever asked any questions."

"What about Sally Calder?" Rico asked.

"She ain't in on it. She was just a good friend from up New York way. She didn't know anything about me. Neither did Tom. I—I never wanted the boy to know what I really was. I wanted him to have a chance. A real chance."

Acker, alias Frankie Jenks, began to cough blood, and his pain-wracked eyes were glazing. He looked toward where the thin gunman lay dead.

"Sally just heard that Randy Kann was in town, and came to warn me. I was hiding out."

"You faked that jacket, and hid out, and had Mrs. Calder bring you your food?" Rico said.

Acker nodded. The pain was deep in his face now, and his breath was growing labored. "I wanted you to think I was dead. When I heard Randy was in town, I figured to make a run for it on the boat. I—I wanted to . . . start again."

"For the boy?" Shayne said.

Acker lay with his eyes closed, breathing very slow and hard. After a time his eyes opened again, he looked up at Shayne.

"No. For myself, I guess. Tom wouldn't have—liked me the way I

really . . . am . . . I hope he makes out—okay."

Acker tried a smile. It faded from his bloodless lips. He coughed, and his eyes widened. "Sally, I . . ."

He was dead. Where she sat, smoking, Sally Calder began to cry.

XVIII

DEPUTY RICO drove Mike Shayne to the hospital the next morning. Rico was elated, but also subdued.

"It was all there. One million, five hundred thousand dollars. I guess we'll never know who the other two men were," the deputy said. "Acker just tried to double-cross his partners, and killed Rojas. Randy Kann was supposed to hear from Rojas, I guess, and didn't, so came on down. I guess he knew who Acker was; Frankie Jenks. When Sally Calder learned from you that Kann was looking for Acker, she ran to tell him."

"Yeah," Shayne said. "Kann tore up the countryside, watched Sally Calder, and tortured Tom, but he didn't work hard on me. He started to, but when he found out I didn't know that Acker was really Frankie Jenks, he figured I really didn't know anything. That's what gave me the idea Fred Acker was really alive and hiding out."

"Good thinking," Rico said.

At the hospital Tom Acker was still bandaged, but out of any danger. Rico told the boy everything. Tom Acker's unseen face turned

toward Shayne while Rico talked. At the end, the boy made a sound that seemed like crying.

"So you killed him? My father?"

"He killed himself, Tom, the day he became a thief and a criminal," Shayne said.

"I know," Tom said, "but it doesn't help. He was my Dad. He thought about me, he wanted to help me."

"All right," Shayne said. "Get it out of your system. Be bitter. Hate the hell out of Rico and me. Do it for a week, a month, then think of Mary."

Tom Acker said nothing. He lay there in the bed, beaten half to death because his father had been a robber underneath the surface, but he was a good boy, and all he thought about was that his father was dead.

"She's a good girl, Tom, and I think you're a damned good boy. You've lost your father, but you'll be a man once you understand that a man lives his own life, and then you go and get Mary. Don't let her parents stop you, and don't let them lie to her. Get her. Make your life here and without help. Do it on your own!"

Tom Acker was silent. Then; "Tell her, will you, Shayne?"

"I'll tell her," Shayne said. "Come on, Rico."

The big redhead strode out with the deputy following him. Rico drove him back to Moreton Bay Police Headquarters. Mike Shayne got his car and drove off toward John Senter's house to make his final report and collect the rest of his money.

Tom Acker would be okay.

Read: In the OCTOBER issue:

SPIRIT OF EVIL

The New MIKE SHAYNE Short Novel

by BRETT HALLIDAY

Silent, alone, she died as she had lived—this girl who had made her life in a house peopled with music and dreams. Bad music, that is. And dreams born of dope. And Murder. Mike Shayne didn't want this case. It had all the cards stacked against him. For his assignment was to find and take a killer—if he managed to stay alive that long! Don't miss this thrilling novel. It's one of the very best!

STAIN ON HIS HANDS

by

DAN ROSS

*Once to every cop it may come,
the day men look at him with
hate and fear as "The Killer Cop"*



IT WAS AN oppressively hot, humid night. The patrol car glided down the broad avenue of ugly red brick tenements, most of them having ground floor stores with garish neon signs. It was strangely quiet.

An occasional languid figure lolled by a street lamp or stood arms akimbo in the doorway of a shadowy bar. Men in T-shirts and women in slips leaned out the crazy patch of murky yellow windows in the tenements above.

The man at the wheel of the patrol car took it all in. He said: "Pretty quiet, Joe."

The officer at his side was young, about the same build and type as the driver. They were picked men, assigned to this explosive area until the crisis was over. They were both much alike and understood each other well. The only difference in the two seemed unimportant to them. Bart Stewart, the policeman driving, had black skin while Officer Joe Flynn's was white.

Joe Flynn stiffened and pointed ahead. "Up there! On the sidewalk!"

Driver Bart Stewart nodded and his foot went down hard on the ac-

celerator. Ahead a man was standing half-way up a stepladder near the curb, haranguing a couple of dozen bystanders. The police commissioner had given strict orders that these sidewalk gatherings were out because of the riots.

Joe Flynn tensed himself to jump out of the car and at the same time noted that the man on the ladder was white while his listeners were mostly colored. As the brakes were applied he leapt from the car and made his way toward the group. The man on the ladder saw him coming and gave him a disdainful smile. His hair was blond and he had the bloated face of a heavy drinker.

He said something to the crowd and came down the ladder to meet Flynn. Then, crying out some obscenities, he pulled a shining automatic from his trousers pocket with shocking swiftness. There was an excited outcry from the bystanders as they scurried for cover.

In the split second of the gun's appearance Joe reached for his own weapon and with a training that made his action a keyed response aimed for the man's arm and pressed the trigger. The man lunged forward and his bloated face registered surprise as Flynn's bullet hit him. His right arm jerked almost straight up and the gun flew out of his grasp and landed with a clatter in the shadows of the curb. Then the blond man slumped to the pavement.

Joe Flynn dashed forward and bent over him. Even before he turned him to check for a heartbeat he knew that he'd killed him. The bullet had found its mark in the blond man's chest.

Bart Stewart stood by him now. He said: "You had to do it, Joe."

Flynn glanced up into the dark, understanding face. "I only meant to wing him. I—"

"I know," Stewart nodded. "I'd better call in." He walked to the car.

There was a crowd gathering and Flynn was aware of their aggressive murmuring. He remembered the dead man's gun. He got up and pushed through the staring faces to the curb. It took him a couple of minutes to find the lost automatic. It was lying close to the curb at the feet of a thin, frightened-looking youngster. The teenager's pinched face worked nervously as Flynn scooped up the gun and glanced at him.

The shock came when he studied it closely. It hit him like a blow in the stomach! The gun was a toy! It looked real but it was just a gleaming fake you could buy in any five and dime!

He was standing staring at it with dull eyes when Stewart came back. His friend's reaction was swift. He pushed Joe Flynn roughly.

"Forget it," he said. "We have work to do."

The crowd of onlookers had



grown. Now other patrol cars shrilled up and the police formed a group around the body. The men from Homicide were on their way.

Bart Stewart came to Flynn again. "How about a smoke?" he said, offering him a cigarette.

Flynn took it automatically and Bart Stewart lit it for him. After a couple of puffs, Flynn said: "He's the first person I ever killed and I didn't have to do it!"

Stewart frowned. "He made you think you did. Crazy man, he was! Swingin' that toy gun like he meant business!"

"His name was Jim Reed," Flynn said. "He was carrying a longshoreman's union card."

"Lives near here," Stewart said.

The ambulance came and they talked no more.

It was after midnight when Joe Flynn got home to his modest apartment. Nora usually waited up after she'd put the children to bed and they had a lunch and talked over the day. She met him in the hallway with a hug and kiss. They had a good marriage.

Nora sensed at once something was wrong. Her eyes showed concern. "What happened?"

"A busy evening," he said brusquely as they went into the bright kitchen. He slumped in his usual chair beside the table. And then he told her.

When he'd finished she said: "Thank God he didn't kill you!"

He gave her a twisted smile. "With a toy gun?"

"You couldn't know that! Bart was right! You did the only thing you could!"

"Bart didn't kill him," he said with a deep sigh and buried his face in his hands. "I keep wondering if he had a couple of kids like us."

"Stop it!" Nora's voice trembled.

He raised his eyes to her. "I need time to think this out. I'm glad tomorrow is my day off."

The next morning it was hot and humid again. Flynn left the apartment early, dressed in plain clothes. He took the subway to the district where Jim Reed had lived. The tenement was over a fruit market and fried chicken store. On impulse he went into the store. There were a half-dozen male and female customers in there and the proprietor who was stout and bald and looked like a Greek.

Joe Flynn went directly to him: "You know a family upstairs? Name of Reed."

The bald man wiped his hands on his apron. "Sure, the Reeds! Jim often came in here." He gave Joe a sharp look. "You know what happened to him, don't you?"

The place had become strangely quiet. The white and colored customers staring at Joe Flynn with the enmity reserved for an intruder in the neighborhood.

A sharp-eyed girl in a low cut print dress came over and gave him an ugly smile. "You bet you know, mister," she snapped. "You're a cop! You're the cop that shot Joe last night!"

Flynn felt his insides churn. He answered quietly though: "Yes, that's true."

The girl wheeled her lithe body around to the others. "Look at him. Big cop! Killed poor Jim Reed for carrying a toy gun!"

"You were there," he said. "You saw what happened!"

The Greek came around the counter nervously. "Jennie don't mean any harm, mister. But she was a friend of Jim's. All of us knew Jim."

Jennie ranted on: "Jim wanted a square deal for everyone. That's why he was put out of the union. That's what he was tellin' us when you came along last night."

"I see," Flynn said. And to the proprietor: "Did Jim Reed work regularly?"

"Pretty regularly," the man said. "Course he liked his liquor and lost a day now and then. His wife works steady at a cleaning plant down the avenue." And as if remembering, he added: "She leaves the kids with Jim's old aunt on Hawthorne Street."

Flynn got the number of the house and left the store. So there were kids! And Jim Reed had been popular in the neighborhood. He'd even lost his job for his principles.

He arrived at the house in Hawthorne Street and went up dark, smelly stairs to the second floor where he found a greasy card tacked to a green door with a cracked panel. The name written on it was: *Reed*. He knocked and waited.

The woman who answered was in contrast to her surroundings, small and tidy in a dark dress. Her hair was white and her face pinched. She squinted at him:

"Yes?"

"I'm trying to locate Jim Reed's wife and children," he said.

"I sent the boys to a playground with an older lad," she said. "Are you the police?"

He nodded. "I'm not here on official business." And he told her.

She listened and then in a dry voice told him: "I'm sorry for you."

"Thank you," he said with sincerity. There was understanding in her manner.

"You should talk to his wife," the old woman said nervously. "I don't think Mabel would mind. She's at the dry-cleaning plant down the avenue."

"She's working today?" he asked with surprise.

"It seemed best," the old woman said.

Flynn bowed his head. Then,

raising troubled eyes to hers, he said: "I'm badly mixed up about this. All sorts of things are worrying me. I keep wondering about his boys."

"They loved their father. He was their idol."

It cut him like a knife. Nora had been right in warning him against this.

But no matter what the torture he must go on with it. He said: "And you?"

She shrugged. "He was my dead brother's only child. I loved him like a son."

Again the knife went deep.

"I'm sorry," he said. "He must have been a good man."

"Talk to Mabel about that," the old woman said tearfully. "Please go!"

Flynn mumbled an apology and left her. He had killed a man with a gift for leadership whose family loved him. How could he take this home to Nora and the girls? How could he ride in the patrol car again with Bart Stewart and trust himself with a gun?

The owner of the cleaning plant arranged for him to talk to the widow privately in his office. Mrs. Reed proved slender, not over twenty-five with a pretty face if you forgot about the dark circles under her eyes.

Joe Flynn waved her to a chair. "I won't keep you long." Then he told her. He ended by saying: "Please forgive me for killing him.

I'll never be able to forgive myself."

The young woman stared at him. "You've got this all wrong," she said.

"Wrong?"

"About Jim, I mean," she said. "You got it mixed up. Sure the neighbors thought he was a great guy. And the kids loved him. So did his aunt, though he broke her heart."

"But he was a leader in his union," Flynn said.

"They took him off the docks because he stole," the widow said bitterly. "Look, Joe was all bad, Mr. Flynn. But he had a streak that made people like him until they got to know him well enough. I soon found out after we were married. He liked to pretend he was a big shot! Whenever he went on a binge he started holding meetings! He liked to cause trouble!"

Joe Flynn starred at her. "All this is true?"

"It's true," Mrs. Reed said. "I'm still carrying the bruises he gave me."

Joe Flynn left, promising to see her at the funeral. He made it plain he wanted to do something for her and the two boys he'd made fatherless. And somehow her revelation had brought him no real relief.

The rest of the afternoon he sat alone in a park and wandered aimlessly through crowded streets. He stopped at various places for coffee but ate nothing. It was after

eight in the evening when he found himself on the steps of the great cathedral on the avenue.

He was not a regular churchman. It was his practice to leave this to Nora and the children but now he had a compulsion to enter this place of sanctuary if only as a stranger. Feeling awkward and humble, he went inside and sat in an empty pew at the back of the cool, old building with its high arched roof. There were only a scattering of people there as he knelt and prayed for the first time in a long while.

His first prayer was for Jim Reed. And when he finished praying for him he asked that the burden not be too great for his widow and boys. Then he prayed for Nora and his own children and asked forgiveness for himself. With his thoughts still confused he got up quickly and left the church.

Twilight came and he decided to go home. He would tell Nora what he had discovered and what he had done so far. She opened the door to him and her worried face changed to one of happy relief. "I've been thinking all sorts of dreadful things had happened to you!"

"It's all right," he said quietly.

She gave him a knowing look. "Bart is here waiting to see you. He's in the bedroom saying good-night to the girls. I'll call him out."

Nora went down the hall.

Stewart came to him a moment later, his dark face showing relief.

"You've been gone a long time, mister," he said.

Now Nora came back to join them and urged his friend: "Tell him, Bart!"

"Well," Stewart said, "I made a lucky catch late this afternoon. A little brown boy up the avenue tried his first hold-up. I came by in time to stop him."

"Congratulations," Joe Flynn said. "I hope there was no shooting."

"Not this time," Stewart said. "I didn't need to use my gun. When I followed that kid into the tobacco shop he just dropped his automatic and went into a kind of trembling fit."

"Too bad it doesn't work out that way every time," Flynn said with a sigh.

Bart Stewart shrugged. "This was easy. You see the kid wasn't used to handling a gun. He never had a real one until last night. Last night when he exchanged his toy gun for the automatic Jim Reed let drop by the curb."

At that moment Joe Flynn had a vivid recall of a pinched brown face and the thin youth who had stood nervously by the toy gun. And a glance at the smiling Bart Stewart told him he was right.

Joe Flynn stretched out his arms to Nora and she came into them without saying anything.

There are times when words aren't necessary.

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THE CONSPIRATORS

by MICHAEL GILBERT



EVERY AUGUST, while Patrick Petrella was a detective constable up at Highside, the Circus and Funfair appeared on the heath. If duty took him there, Petrella cut his visit as short as possible. Otherwise, his colleagues noticed, he avoided it altogether.

Later, when he was promoted and married, his wife remarked on the same peculiarity. He had not bothered to explain it to his colleagues at Highside and he hesitated to do so even to his wife, from whom he had few secrets. In the end, he did tell her about it.

They were motoring in France, and had stopped in a village to buy stores for their midday meal. On the whitewashed wall, outside the

Mairie, a poster, faded by the hot sun of Provence, advertised the Cirque Jacquetti.

"Goodness!" Petrella said. "I wonder if Sam Borner still runs it. I don't think so. He must be eighty, if he's still alive".

"Tell me about Sam," Jane asked him.

Petrella hesitated. It had all happened a long time ago. It had been the first time that he had grasped the fact that hate can be more compelling than love; and the first time that he had seen, in action, a conspiracy, to kill.

The passage of time had buried these events deep, but small things —the distant roar of a caged lion, a clockwork clown tumbling about

*Somewhere under the Big Top an un-
scheduled act had exploded. Wild beast . . .
jealous suitor . . . avenging demon . . . who or what
had bludgeoned Manfredo to death?
A little boy alone guessed the answer.*



the pavement, a tattered circus poster—still had the power to twitch at his nerves.

"I'll tell you when we stop for lunch," he said. "It was my first murder case. I was eleven years old at the time."

When you are young, each summer holiday hangs on a thread of remembrance. A sight, a sound, a smell. To Patrick Petrella, that pre-war summer at Perpignan hung on a poster. Not faded and fly-blown like the one he had just seen, but eye-catching in glorious colors, it depicted two white horses, in harness of black leather and trappings of gold, cantering around a sawdust ring, each ridden by a slender, graceful, grave-eyed lemur, dressed in a lady's riding-habit with a tiny crimson cap on one side of its furry head.

Patrick was vague as to why his family were in Perpignan—as vague as to why they had spent the summer before in Cairo or the summer before that in Casablanca. He knew that his father worked for the Spanish government, and he surmised that it was business which had brought them to the French side of the Pyrenees.

It was something to do with refugees, and every now and then they would go for long drives through the mountains, meeting French and Spanish policemen and shepherds and muleteers on both sides of the frontier. But for the most part his father was closeted with Monsieur

le Commissaire Theron, in the police station, and Patrick was free to amuse himself.

As well as his native Spanish Patrick spoke street boy Arabic and French, and he slipped about the sunlit streets of Perpignan, a thin, dark, friendly shadow, making new acquaintances along the river front, dropping one, picking up another, listening more than he spoke. It did not take him long to discover the Cirque Jacquetti in the Champ des Martyrs, the little plateau on the inland side of the city where the dragoons had shot and sabred more than a hundred unarmed Huguenots during the *Repression*.

The Champ des Martyrs was the permanent base of the Jacquettis. It was from there that its component parts, the first and second-ring shows, and the fun fairs, sometimes operating with the circus, and sometimes on their own, went out on planned marches, south to the Rock of Gibraltar, north as far as Bruges and Ostend where they met, but did not trespass on the territory of the other great European troupe, the German Muller-hilde. Perpignan was their base.

Patrick liked it best when, as now, it was almost empty. August was the peak of the troup ing season. All that was left behind, inside the high wire perimeter, was a shed full of old fun-fair machinery, a row of caravans, most of them empty, the cages where the big cats lived, the stables for the horses, the

kennels for the dogs, and a handful of people.

Manfredo and Ramon were called brothers, although, in the complicated in-breeding of circus life no one quite knew whether they really were. Both were swarthy, handsome and attractive, and both were bullies, in the way that men who spend their lives controlling big cats often are.

Domenico Stromboli, who came from Naples, looked after the dogs. Or, to be truthful, the dogs looked after Stromboli. He was a cripple. Polio had reduced his arms and one of his legs to withered sticks. The circus had built him a little padded carriage, which two of the six Alsations took turns to pull.

He had first appeared, to Patrick's fascinated gaze, driving at a canter across the wide and dusty compound, with two Alsations running escort in front of him and two more behind, surrounded by a tumbling, snapping, skirmishing pack of poodles.

Patrick had got into the closely guarded enclosure by the kindness of his special friend, Auguste.

Auguste was a stand-in clown. He looked after the horses. His particular charges were Rosalie and Marguerite, the beautiful white thoroughbreds, whose likeness Patrick had so often admired on the poster. They were resting for a few weeks. Sam Borner, who had married, twenty years before, into the Jacquetti family, and had now the



controlling voice in the circus, knew the virtue of not overdriving a willing and successful turn.

"That's *his* caravan," Auguste said. "Would you like to have a peep at it?"

"I'd like to very much," said Petrella. "If he wouldn't mind."

"He's in town, with Donna. Nina may be there. She won't tell on us."

They climbed the stairs and opened the door, cut in two halves, heavy as a lock gate, built to last, like everything in that wonderful vehicle.

Patrick thought that he had never seen anything so entrancing in his whole life. It was, at once, snug and spacious, and entirely beautiful.

Everything that could shine, shone. The polished teakwood tables, and settles and built-in cupboards; the brass fittings of the

lamps, and the window and door fittings, and the ship's chronometer above the stove, itself a gleaming altar of glazed brick and winking steel.

In one corner stood the cage where Leopold and Lorenzo, the riding lemurs, lived. They sat on a log and stared back at Patrick as he gazed, round-eyed, at them.

Lorenzo wrinkled up his eyes and lifted his upper lip.

"He's laughing at me," said Patrick.

"Laughing at me," agreed a gruff voice behind him.

Patrick swung round.

The largest parrot he had ever seen was sitting on a table behind the door. He was dark bottle green, all over, except for plum colored ruffs around his legs. His head was cocked on one side, and a single round yellow eye was fixed on the boy.

"Oh!" said Patrick. "Oh, what a beauty."

"What a beauty," said the bird complacently. It swung down natively from the rail on top of the cupboard and waddled along the window-seat.

"Stand still," Auguste said. "Quite still. He likes you, I think."

"W-what," said Patrick, "would he do if he didn't?"

"Bite your ear off," said Auguste. "Just you ask Ramon or Manfredo. It's war to the knife between them and Nestor. They used to tease him, pull his tail feathers

out. He bit Manfredo through the thumb, nearly cut it off."

Patrick watched the parrot, scarcely daring to breathe. It sidled along the table top towards him, still transfixing him with one unwinking yellow eye. Then it dipped its green head suddenly forward, caught the corner of Patrick's handkerchief, and whipped it out of his pocket.

"Hey!" said Patrick.

"Hey," said the parrot, dropped the handkerchief and broke into a scream of laughter.

"He does like you, see?" said a long-legged, dark-haired girl. She had come out of the back part of the caravan, where she had been tidying and cleaning the bedroom. "If she takes something of yours, it shows she likes you."

The girl picked up the parrot without fuss, held it in one hand and smoothed its head fathers with the other. The parrot preened itself.

"This is Nina," said Auguste. "She is a wonderful girl. She loves all creatures, and fears none."

Although he was only ten, Patrick was an observant boy, and when Auguste said "creatures" it occurred to him that he might be including two legged creatures as well. She was a very attractive girl.

The week that followed was a week of unmixed delight. Tolerated by old Stromboli, encouraged by Auguste and Nina, he explored every corner of the Jacquetti en-



campment. He avoided Ramon and Manfredo and studied the great Sam Borner, owner and boss of the Jacquettis and his wife Donna, from a respectful distance. But these were only the humans. It was the animals he loved. The six great Alsatian dogs, who were the policemen of the kingdom, and the tumbling crowd of poodles who formed the C.I.D., sharp-eared, sneaky, ubiquitous. The old circus horses, their working life over, who lived at ease, grazed behind the caravans by day and were stabled by night in the shed opposite Sam Borner's caravan.

Rosalie and Marguerite, queens of the ring, each with a stall of her

own, with her name on a shingle nailed over it; the great cats, in their cages at the far end of the enclosure, to be watched, like Ramon and Manfredo, but not approached. White doves, who lived on the rafters of the pony shed, and would come to Nina when she whistled. A marmoset who shared Auguste's caravan, and spent its day vainly trying to catch the pigeons. Leopold and Lorenzo, the lemurs, who could ride and look after horses as well as any stable boy, who lived in Sam Borner's caravan, and were taken out of their cage by Nina every afternoon for a walk, on long leather leads; and Nestor the parrot, who was said to be more than a hundred years old, and very wise.

It was at the end of that week, on the Sunday morning, that Monsieur Theron came to call on Patrick's father.

Their talk took place in the front parlor, a place of peculiar French rectitude and gloom. Monsieur Theron was a middle-aged and a deceptively mild appearance. It was later to deceive the Germans, to their undoing. Patrick sat, unnoticed, in a corner behind a table covered with family photographs. He listened, in growing horror, to what was being recounted.

"Dead," said Theron. "The skull fractured by a single blow."

"How long?"

"Discovered at six o'clock this

morning. The doctor said that death must have occurred at least five hours before. Not more than seven."

"Died after midnight, then," said Patrick's father.

Patrick had heard only scraps of the earlier conversation. He had thought they were talking about refugees. Now he wished that he had listened. Because it was to do with the circus. Someone had been killed.

"We have held his brother for questioning."

So! It was Manfredo or Ramon. Patrick felt a sense of relief. It would have been terrible if it had been one of his friends, Auguste or Nina or Stromboli. Even the majestic Sam Borner or his kindly little wife. If someone had to be dead, better one of the savage brothers.

"It will be difficult to prove anything," said Theron. "It is true that the field is surrounded by a barbed wire fence, but an active man could surmount it almost anywhere."

"Have you any particular reason to suspect Ramon?"

"Spaniards," said Theron, and then stopped. It had occurred to him that what he was about to say might not, in the circumstances, be very tactful.

"Can behave like wild beasts," Patrick's father agreed smoothly. "But there is usually some particular reason for a killing as cold-

blooded as this would seem to have been."

"The brothers were drinking in the Café d'Algérie—it is a riverside drinking place—until close on eleven o'clock. They were excited and shouting. They left separately. So much is established."

WHEN M. THERON had departed, Patrick said to his father, "It is not true."

"What is not true, Patrick?"

"It is not true that anyone from outside could get over the wire fence and into the field of the circus. By day, it would be difficult. By night impossible."

"How so?"

"Because of the dogs. Would you like to try?"

Patrick's father looked at him seriously. He said, "I have no official standing here. Monsieur Theron consults me because he is friendly, and, I suspect, a little out of his depth with a case which involves two Spaniards, a Yorkshireman with a Milanese wife, a Neopolitan, a Belgian and a local girl."

Patrick's mouth opened.

"How do you know about these people?"

"You have talked to me about them, many times."

"I talked to you," said Patrick, "but you didn't listen."

"When you grow up and become a policeman," said his father, "you will find that it is a great advantage not to appear too attentive. As

I was saying, I have no status in this matter. But if what you tell me is true, it is clearly a fact of importance, which should be established in a proper scientific manner. We will take a walk together this evening after dinner."

They approached the Champ des Martyrs with due precaution, from the back. It was a soft, luminous night, with the moon half full. Ahead of them loomed the bulk of the machinery shed, concealing them from view. The corner of the wire fence was supported here by an upright of iron angle-bar.

"This would be the best place," said Patrick's father. He spoke in a whisper. "Will you go over, or shall I?"

"I'd better," said Patrick. "They know me."

He gripped the stanchion and climbed up, easily enough, using the strands of the wire as steps. He had reached the top, and was steadyng himself, with one hand on the roof of the shed, when a shrill yap sounded. As Patrick dropped to the ground, two dark forms materialized at the corner of the shed.

Patrick moved out from behind the shed, into the moonlight. The Alsatians were uncertain. The boy looked and smelled like someone they knew, but was behaving suspiciously. A small black dog ran up. Patrick stooped, and it jumped into his arms and started licking his face.

The Alsatians lost interest. If Kiki vouched for the stranger; he was all right. Patrick walked back to his father, put the toy poodle gently down, and climbed out.

"You see?" he said.

"Yes," his father said. "I see."

The processes of the law are never quick. It was nearly a week



later that Sam Borner's wife called on them.

Donna Borner had been fifteen, and a promising equestrienne when Sam had married her and inherited his slice of the Jacquetti enterprise. Twenty-five years of married life and the rearing of three sons had rounded out her figure and engraved some wrinkles on her face, but, until that black week, life had treated her kindly.

Now she was frightened.

She said, in an accent in which her North Italian consonants mixed curiously with broad Yorkshire vowels, "They have taken Sam for questioning. They took him this morning. They will not let me see him. It is a terrible mistake."

Patrick's father made her sit down. He talked to her, and Pat-

rick admired the skill with which he extracted the facts without seeming to ask any questions at all.

The police at first had suspected Ramon. He was a violent man; he had been drinking. He had been the last person seen with Manfredo. But he could have had no hand in the killing. When he left the café he had caused an uproar by trying to break into the house of a girl he knew. The police had been called. He had been arrested and had spent the night in one of the police lock-ups.

"I should not have let him go quite so quickly," Patrick's father said. "I should like to know exactly at what time he caused this convenient uproar."

Donna Borner was uncertain. What she did know was that Ramon, exculpated, had turned inquisitor. He had vowed to find the killer of his brother. And the possible suspects were very few. The killing had occurred just outside the pony shed. Inside the camp. It was not at all easy for an outsider to get in undetected, because of the dogs.

Patrick's father nodded. He said that he knew about the dogs. Who would have been in the camp legitimately that night?

The answer was simple. Stromboli, neither of whose arms was strong enough to lift a tack-hammer, let alone a sledge hammer. Auguste, who had a caravan in the middle of the line of caravans.

Donna herself, and her husband. They had the caravan at the end, nearest to the pony shed.

The other caravans belonged to people who were out on circuit, and they were empty. Ramon and Manfredo had a caravan at the far end, near the cages of the big cats who were in their charge.

Patrick's father had a pencil in his hand, and was drawing a neat little sketch as she spoke, marking in the stables, the dog kennels, the machine sheds and the cages, round three sides of a square, and the line of caravans along the top.

He said, "And Nina?"

"How did you know about Nina?" asked Donna. "Oh, I see—" She had spotted Patrick, in his favorite place in the corner. "The boy told you. He is friends with all at the camp. It could not have been Nina. She is a local girl. She sleeps at home."

Patrick's father was drawing a series of little arrows on his diagram. One ran from the corner behind the shed to the dog kennels; a second from the kennels to the pony stables; a third from the stables to the line of caravans.

"So," he said at last. "Auguste—or your husband."

MONSIEUR THERON AGREED, "Certainly it could have been Auguste, although he is thin as a rush, he is tough as a rush, too, and has very strong wrists and forearms. All clowns have. It is their early

training in tumbling. Certainly he had a motive also. Not long ago he interested to defend Nina then Manfredo was being offensive, and received a thrashing for his pains."

"Then?" Patrick's father said.

"Fortunately for him—unfortunately for Monsieur Bonner—Auguste can show that he was nowhere near the camp that night." He looked out of the corner of his eye at Patrick, and said, "Auguste spent that night with Nina, in her house."

Patrick's father said to him. "I think you'd better buzz off, old boy."

"Oh, nonsense," said Patrick impatiently. "We all knew that Auguste was Nina's lover. That's why he stuck up for her and got knocked about by Manfredo. Manfredo wanted her himself. I didn't say anything about it because I wasn't sure whether it was a terribly good alibi. After all, if she was fond of him, she'd say he was there, wouldn't she?"

Monsieur Theron smiled, and said, "Very true. But in this case the concierge of the house where Nina lodges confirms it. Auguste arrived at ten o'clock in the evening and did not leave until six o'clock the following morning."

"A concierge is a jealous watch dog," said Patrick's father. "But even she must sleep sometimes."

"Agreed," Theron said. "But this one did not go to bed before one o'clock. Until that time she

could hear the man and girl laughing and talking in their room. Manfredo, remember, was dead by one o'clock."

"Did she *see* Auguste? Or simply hear his voice?"

"Heard him," said Theron. "What was in your mind?"

"He has a funny high pitched voice. Easy to imitate."

"That's true enough," said Patrick. "I've heard Nestor—he's the Borner's parrot—imitate him exactly. But then, he can take off all of them."

Monsieur Theron was frowning. "I am a man of logic," he said. "If it be accepted that no one, except its regular inmates, could enter the camp after dark without being detected by the dogs, we have the following position. A man is struck down and killed with a heavy instrument, most probably of metal and circular in shape, according to the autopsy. A sledge hammer, perhaps. The man who is killed was a bully and a lecher."

"Any one of his fellows might have had cause to strike the blow. When was the blow struck? Between eleven o'clock and one o'clock, says the doctor. But we can be more precise than that. The man Stromboli heard Manfredo come back to the camp."

Patrick and his father looked up quickly.

"Yes. That is so. We learned it only this morning. The old man sleeps with his dogs. The sharp-

eared *caniches*! They woke him at midnight. He heard Manfredo. The inmates, when they come in late, they do not use the gate. There are places at the back where they climb through the wire."

"He knew it must be one of the regulars," said Patrick's father. "But how did he know it was Manfredo?"

"He heard him. Manfredo was intoxicated and he was talking to himself, loudly."

"Did Stromboli go out to see?"

"He says no. He would not interfere with Manfredo sober. Certainly not when he was intoxicated."

Patrick's father had taken out his sketch plan. Now he marked a spot behind the row of machinery sheds.

"Manfredo would climb in on the south side, behind the machinery sheds—here? Emerge by the end of the sheds, pass Stromboli and the dogs—so? And make his way across the open center of the compound, towards the row of caravans on the north side."

Monsieur Theron nodded. "And these caravans, remember, Signor Petrella, were all empty save one. The large caravan at the end, occupied by Borner and his wife. Let us suppose that Borner hears this sot approaching, staggering across the open. He sees his chance. He picks up a heavy iron tent hammer. He creeps up behind him. One blow, and it is finished."

"But why? Why would he do it?"

"He had a reason. All the circus knew it. I have no doubt your boy knows it, too."

Patrick looked at his father, who said, "Tell me."

"It was about ten days ago. Three days before Manfredo was killed. Nina was taking Leopold and Lorenzo for their afternoon walk—they are the lemurs, who live in Sam Borner's caravan. Lorenzo slipped his leash, got into Manfredo's caravan, and stole an orange. They're both terrible thieves."

"Manfredo chased him out, and Lorenzo got into a tree, and started to eat the orange and throw the peel at Manfredo. Everyone was laughing except Manfredo. He was mad. He got his long whip, the one he uses on his cats, and flicked Lorenzo with it. It nearly cut his tail off."

"And do you think," his father said, "that that would be sufficient provocation?"

"Circus people think of their animals as children," said Theron. "If someone flicked your child with a whip—"

"They're terribly valuable, too," Patrick said. "They ride Rosalie and Marguerite, you see. It's one of the main attractions of the circus. They're terribly clever with them. Just like real jockeys. It's taken Sam fifteen years to train them."



Patrick broke off. It suddenly occurred to him that he might be talking too much. His father had returned to his sketch plan.

"One thing puzzles me," he said. "Manfredo was found in the entrance of the stable."

"If you are thinking," Theron said with a smile, "that one of the horses may have kicked him, I can assure you that it is impossible, unless it had legs of elastic! The nearest horse was tethered in its stall, a full ten paces from the door."

"I wasn't thinking of that. I was wondering what he was doing there at all. His caravan is at the other end of the line. Crossing the open compound, he would go to the right to get to it. Why did he bear left-handed towards the stables?"

"Who knows?" said Theron. "He was drunk. He may have lost direction."

"He might," said Patrick's father. "It's curious, all the same." He was frowning in a way that Patrick recognized. He said, "I too am a man of logic. I will concede to you that Borner is the only man who

could have done this thing *by himself*. His wife would be a tacit accomplice, but we need not concern ourselves with her. Have you, however, considered that it could have been done, quite easily, by two people in concert—a conspiracy."

It was clear that Monsieur Theron had not thought about it.

"I will suggest two possible combinations. There may well be more. Clearly Auguste and Nina could have worked it. No one saw Auguste after eleven o'clock. The concierge heard his high pitched voice. A voice which, as we have heard, even the parrot could imitate. If a parrot, how much more easily could a clever girl do so?"

Monsieur Theron frowned, and said, "Auguste seems to me—somehow—an unlikely murderer."

"Agreed. Then let me suggest a second one. Ramon. Who knows what tensions may grow between brothers. Did not Cain kill Abel?"

"But—"

"But Ramon was in a police-station cell by midnight. Agreed. But suppose he followed his brother back to the circus, killed him at half past eleven, and immediately took steps to have himself arrested. That trouble he stirred up, it seemed to me a little obvious, even at the time."

"But—"

"But we are told that Manfredo was alive at twelve. Who by? By Stromboli. But who knows what he

may not be in this with Ramon?"

"A conspiracy," said Theron. He sounded unhappy, as a man may, who has arrived at what seems to be the unique solution of a problem, and perceived that it may only be one of three.

"I worked out a fourth possibility," said Patrick's father, "involving Ramon, Stromboli *and* Sam Borner."

"No, no," said Theron. "Three is enough. You have said quite sufficient to make me doubt my own diagnosis. Possibly I ought to let Mr. Borner go. It is not right to detain a man who might be innocent. On the other hand, it might be wise to detain him for his own protection. That brute Ramon has sworn to avenge his brother."

Monsieur Theron took himself off, a worried frown on his good-natured face. After he had gone, Patrick said to his father, "Did you really believe any of those ideas, or did you make them up to get Sam out of a hole?"

"Didn't they sound convincing?"

"Oh, yes. They were terribly convincing."

Patrick's father looked hard at him. If his son was capable of pulling his leg, he must be growing up.

"But I gather that they didn't convince you."

"They were quite all right," said Patrick. "Quite logical. They *could* have planned it like that. The thing is, though, that they *wouldn't*.

Auguste isn't the sort of person to kill anyone. And Ramon bickers a lot with Manfredo, but he *wouldn't* kill him. Manfredo was killed by someone who *hated* him. I'm positive at that."

"By Sam Borner, then?"

"Not by Sam," said Patrick.

THE IDEA HAD not come to Patrick suddenly. It had grown, from little things; things noticed, things heard, half observation, half impression. It was not a logical solution. It was more like a picture. He saw Manfredo, full of wine, muttering and stumbling, climbing through the wire perimeter at the well-known place steering an unsteady course across the dusty, moon-lit compound, towards his caravan and bed. And then—his father had noticed it—something must have diverted him.

Patrick did not believe that Manfredo drifted off course. A drunken man has a compass which takes him to his own bed. *Something* had attracted him to the front of the pony shed, and, inside that dark entrance, the murderer was crouched, ready to kill.

It might be proved, too. Only the time was short, and getting shorter.

In three or four days the main circus would be back. The camp would be full of shouting, working, jostling people; the lights would be on most of the night as they repaired, against time, machinery

and equipment for the autumn circuit.

The caravans would all be occupied; the clues would be trampled underfoot and the scent would be cold. Also his mother would be back. She had been in England, choosing a school for him. She was the daughter of an English colonel, and had a greater believe in the virtues of English boarding schools than either Patrick or his father. When she was back his liberty would be severely curtailed.

He spent the next two days on the quayside. Anyone will talk to a polite, good looking eleven-year-old boy.

Patrick listened. There was a single piece of information that he needed. It was late on the evening of the second day, after nine o'clock, when the son of the proprietor of one of the water-side cafes brought him the news. Patrick went back with him to confirm it. He wanted no slipup. The boys stood and peered through the bead-curtained window. Ramon was sitting at a table, staring at the wall. There was a half empty bottle on the table.

"It's his second," said the boy. "If he makes trouble, my father and his brother will handle him. Shall we stay to watch?"

"No," said Patrick. "I must telephone."

"Why waste money?" said the boy. "Use ours. It is in the passage. I will show you."

Patrick spoke to the housekeeper. His father was out, and would not be back until late.

"When he comes," Patrick said, "tell him—tell him that I am going with some of my friends for a moonlight picnic."

He cut short her protests by ringing off.

Ten minutes later he was climbing alone into the circus enclosure. When the poodles had inspected him, and the Alsatians had sniffed and passed him, he walked round the perimeter of the enclosure, keeping as much as possible in the shadows, until he came to the line of caravans.

Here he moved very cautiously. He was making for an empty caravan, next to the Borners, at the end of the line.

There was a light in the sleeping quarters of the Borners' van. That would be Donna. Even when she got into bed and turned out her light, she would probably not sleep very soundly. She would be worrying about Sam. Great care was necessary.

Patrick fitted into the lock of the empty caravan the key which Nina had, very unwillingly, lent to him, eased it round gently, and went in. It was not as elaborately equipped as the Borners caravan, but was constructed on the same lines. There was a cushioned couch under the side window. Patrick climbed onto it, and opened the window.

It was a night of strong magic. The full face of the moon looked down from a sky of black velvet. It was so bright that it seemed to be generating a light and heat of its own.

It was very quiet. Patrick could hear the clack of the sharp little hoof on the concrete as Rosalie or Marguerite moved in her stall, and, away on the far side of the compound, a throaty rumble as old Rosso the lion dreamed of the forests of his youth.

From where he knelt, every detail of the living room of the Borners caravan was picked out in the cold white moonlight. Opposite to him, on his perch by the open window, sat Nestor, the big green parrot. His eyes were shut.

Of Nestor alone, among all the birds and animals of the circus, Patrick was afraid. He had been afraid since he had discovered, in a book of his father's, that Nestor was his real name. Nestor notabilis, the sheep-killing parrot of Australia and New Zeland. He had read how they would fly on to the back of a terrified and cornered sheep and peck through its back, into its liver. He had read, too, how the enraged farmers tried to trap them and how the parrots, endowed with human cunning and calculation, had avoided all the snares that were set for them, and even set traps themselves, in return.

Nestor had opened his eyes. For

a moment, Patrick thought he had seen him; that he was going to open his hooked beak, and scream out a warning to the camp. Then he saw that Nestor had his head cocked, and was listening.

The next moment, Patrick heard it too. It was the sound of Ramon returning.

Nestor sidled along his perch towards Leopold and Lorenzo.

Patrick could see that they, too, were awake, moving like shadows, noiselessly, from side to side in their cage.

The door of their cage was fastened with a simple bolt, set well out of reach of the lemurs' arms. Nestor reached out with his beak, lifted the arm of the bolt, and struck it. There was a tiny, metallic clang as the door swung open, and the monkeys were gone, out of the cage, and out of the window.

Nestor hopped up onto the sill, and the next moment, he was gone too. Only the door of the cage, swinging open, showed Patrick that he had not imagined the whole thing.

As he climbed down the steps of the caravan he could see Ramon clearly. The man had come out from behind the shed, and was tacking, unsteadily, across the open, moonlit square.

Then the voice of Auguste spoke from the shadows by the stable. It called out, "Ramon."

The imitation was so perfect that even Patrick, who knew that it

was Nestor, was deceived for a moment.

Ramon swung to his left. The voice added three unforgivable words in gutter Spanish. Ramon broke into a shambling run. Patrick was close enough to see the moonlight glinting from the knife which he carried, blade upwards, Spanish-fashion, in his left hand.

Patrick padded after him, his soles noiseless in the dust. As he rounded the corner, the voice of Auguste spoke for the third time. It came from inside the stable now, rather high up, towards the right.

The moonlight illuminated a small area in the mouth of the shed. In the middle, Ramon stood swaying. On the left—Patrick's heart missed a beat as he saw it—was the pony Rosalie. She had been moved by the lemurs out of her stall, and now stood, fastened only by her head rope, to a ring just inside the door. Leopold sat astride her, jockey wise. Lorenzo crouched on the edge of the stall by her head.

For a heart beat no one moved. Then Lorenzo bent forward and bit Rosalie's ear. At that moment, Ramon stumbled. The stumble saved his life. Rosalie's steel-tipped hoof, lashing out, missed his head, but hit him, with a splintering crack, in the left shoulder. He went down, rolled like an acrobat, and came up onto his feet again. The crack must have been his collar bone going, for his left



arm was hanging limp. The shock had knocked all the drink out of him.

Rosalie was whinnying and stamping behind him, but he ignored her. He was staring, his face was pale as the moon itself, at the rafter above his head.

Nestor was sitting there. She stared down at him with unblinking yellow eyes. It was a battle of wills, and the stronger will prevailed. Ramon turned on his heel, and walked away. As he went the great green parrot gave a scream of derision and triumph.

Ramon broke into a shambling run.

"So," said Theron. "The brother, Ramon, has taken himself off. He crossed the frontier, illicitly, in the early hours of the morning. A guardia saw him, and shot at him, but could not stop him."

"Do we want to stop him?" asked Patrick's father. "Going off like that—it amounts to an admis-

sion of guilt. You will have to let Mr. Borner go, now."

"Of course. I have done so," said Theron. "It is unsatisfactory, all the same, I like a case to be neatly rounded. All the strings tied up. I should like to know why he killed his brother. And what he did it with. And who helped him. For it must have been the work of confederates."

"I don't suppose we shall ever know the real truth," Patrick's father said. And to Patrick, after Monsieur Theron had taken himself off, he said, "You're looking

absolutely done. You must have been out very late last night. I didn't hear you come in."

"I was a bit late," said Patrick.

"It was a last fling," said his father. "Your mother's back today. I've had a letter from her. She's chosen the school. It's on the South Downs. Association Football in the Christmas term and Rugby football in the Easter term. Two headmasters and a qualified matron. It sounds a splendid place."

It sounded splendid to Patrick, too.

But not as nice as a circus.



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SPADEWORK

Somewhere in that house lay a mangled thing that once had been a man. And out in the cold night my partner suddenly nodded. "It's easy," he said. "Look, I'll tell you what to do . . ."

by MICHAEL KURLAND



October Fifth it got cold. *Unseasonably cold*, the newspapers called it. The temperature dropped down to about thirty degrees that evening, and decided to make a night of it. It was cold enough for puddles to freeze over, for people to wear overcoats, for tenants to complain about the lack of heat. Cold enough to remind the city that winter was just around the calendar page.

Cold enough to kill.

The nine-story red brick building on Gate Street that looks as though its 1920 contractor had better things to spend his money on than decent bricks and cement is Police Headquarters. It's also the home of the squad that Phil and I work out of: Homicide South. There's a Homicide North way uptown, sharing a building with the 84th precinct.

AN EXCITING SUSPENSE NOVELET



Phil, the tall skinny one, is Detective First Grade Philip Stone, and I'm Detective Second Alan Schwartz, somewhat shorter and more solidly built. We're one of the nine teams that make up Homicide South.

On Thursday, October sixth, it was still cold. We were at the duty desk trying to catch up with the paper work. To be more accurate, I was trying to catch up. Phil was sprawled across a back desk, doing last Sunday's *Times* Double-Crostic.

Phil had proposed a deal to me when we started working together. "Al," he'd said after I'd made a slight miscalculation during our first case, "I like you. You're a nice guy and you know how to type. Tell you what—I'll solve the cases, and you do the paper work. Okay?"

From that moment it was settled in Phil's mind. I didn't agree, but that made no difference. He hasn't touched a typewriter since. It's all I can do to get him to sign his name now at the bottom of the forms.

The phone started ringing just as I typed the last line on Form PD404—TERMINATION OR DISPOSITION OF PENDING CASE, seven copies. Very considerate of it, I thought, to wait until I was done.

"Homicide Squad. Detective Schwartz speaking."

"Al? This is Brown, from the

Ninth. We think we've got something for you."

"Swell. Glad you're thinking of us. Shot, stabbed, slugged or poisoned?"

"How does 'blown up' sound to you?"

"Comparatively original. Where is it?"

"I'll meet you at the station and take you over."

"Fine, we'll be right there." I hung up.

Phil looked up from the puzzle and raked the brown hair back from over his face with his fingers.

"Original?" he asked, sounding hopeful. "You mean it?"

"Death by explosion," I told him, resisting an impulse to scratch the bald spot on my head.

Phil pulled his jacket off the back of the chair and waved it through the air expressively.

"Some hood, right?" He shrugged the jacket on. "Two sticks of dynamite wired to the starter of his car. Now we've got to find one hood, in a city full of hoods, with a big enough grudge against this other hood to want to spread little pieces of him around the sidewalk. Right?"

"I didn't ask." I adjusted my hat carefully, slanting it over my right eye.

"Why don't you get a hair piece?" Phil suggested kindly.

"A what?" I tried not to sound insulted.

"A toupee, a wig. Then you

could stop playing with that fedora."

"I wear this for effect," I told him. "Haven't you ever seen any of those detective story shows on television? They all wear hats."

"Right," Phil agreed. "But you only started wearing that one when you noticed you were getting bald."

"The fact that my hair is a bit thin has nothing to do with it," I announced firmly. Phil had a sudden coughing spell, and I stopped talking to him while he drove to the precinct.

When we walked into the squad-room of the Ninth, Brown, a tall, handsome Negro and one of the best men in a difficult precinct, was eating a sandwich out of a silver foil wrapper.

He had one of those pocket radios plugged into his ear, the sandwich in one hand and a cup of coffee in the other. Staring at something none of us could see, he was alternating dainty bites of sandwich and sips of coffee in a slow rhythm.

"Rock and roll," Phil snorted. "It fries the mind."

"What's that?" Brown became aware of us, and looked over.

"I said you shouldn't listen to that stuff. It's bad for you," Phil explained.

Brown pulled the earplug out, and sound started coming from the radio's tinny little speaker. It was some high-pitched woman yelling

in Italian. She was yelling in F, and there was a large orchestra behind her.

"Puccini," Brown said. "It's the Opera Hour. I always try to listen to it while I eat lunch."

Phil was unimpressed.

"That's even worse," he said. "You know what she's yelling about? She just stabbed a guy with a pair of scissors."

"No kidding?" said Brown. "I didn't know you speak Italian."

"I don't. I read the plot of an opera once. They're all the same. Where's the stiff?"

"Please," Brown gestured with the sandwich, "not while I'm eating." He turned off the radio. "Stabbed a guy with a pair of scissors, huh? Well, what do you know?"

Gulping down the rest of the sandwich and coffee, he crumpled the silver foil into the paper cup and tossed them into the basket. "Well, let's get with it."

The corpse was in a brownstone on Tudor Street, where DeSilva, Brown's partner, waited for us. As we drove to the scene of the crime, Brown briefed us in a kind of verbal shorthand. "Explosion. Blew the guy into sections. Messiest thing I've ever seen, and I was in a demo unit during the Korean War. Happened late last night."

"Hold it!" Phil sounded annoyed. "Let's see if I've got this right. The crime was committed late last night, so you call us at

three o'clock this afternoon. Let me guess. You didn't want to wake us?"

"Didn't decide it was a homicide until about two hours ago," Brown said. "Fellow tries to turn on an oil furnace and the boiler blows up, you tend to figure it's an accident."

"But it wasn't?" I asked.

"Nope."

"What makes you so sure?"

"Like I told you, I was on a demo team during the Korean thing."

"Yeah?"

"Well, you get to know explosives pretty well, and what blew up in that boiler room wasn't oil."

"What was it?" Phil asked.

"None of the composition explosives either. No shape to it."

"Shape?"

"You know, direction. It just blew."

"Dynamite?"

Brown nodded his head in agreement. "Dynamite or nitro. I would guess dynamite, because who wants to play with nitro?"

We turned on to Tudor Street and parked behind a powder-blue Cadillac that looked very out of place in the neighborhood.

"That's the house," Brown said.

He pointed, and we looked.

The number on the ancient brownstone was 173. There were still two patrol cars there, and the meat wagon had just pulled up, but there was no crowd of curious

sight-seers. It wasn't that sort of a neighborhood. It wasn't much of any sort of neighborhood. An old lower class Jewish and Italian district that had been deserted by the youth as the barriers dropped and they were accepted into the city's society, the area had dropped to slum without pausing. It was a forgotten neighborhood, home of the aged and the drifting.

Phil got out of the car and looked around. He tasted the air and surveyed the sidewalk.

"This way," Brown said, heading for the building.

"Wait a second," Phil said. He stared at the building. "A crime, especially a crime like murder, is the center of a state of flux. The scene of the crime bears an imprint of that flux. The imprint must be searched for and studied if the crime is to be understood."

Brown was impressed. Philip Stone has a certain reputation on the force, and his fellow cops tend to listen to him on the subject of violent death. I was less impressed. Having worked with him for over two years, I knew how large a part pure luck plays in solving his cases. Phil is the luckiest cop I know.

"This imprint," Brown said. "You mean something other than regular clues?"

"Something beyond what are usually called clues, yes. I'm talking about hints, mere suggestions, that can lead to the discovery of



what we call clues. Remember, the clue is usually there, staring you in the face; it's the recognition of the fact that it means something that makes it a clue."

"Shall we go in?" I suggested. I was ignored.

"I think I see what you mean," Brown told Phil.

"Third building in from the corner," Phil said, demonstrating his renowned ability to count. "What's that next to it?" He indicated a sort of one-story brick shed.

"Department of Sanitation building," Brown told him. "Used for storing all those little carts they clean streets with."

"Looks like it's been there since our first Democratic administration," Phil said. "And the corner building?"

"A bank. Entrance is around the

corner. One of the earliest branches of Immigrant's Trust."

"It's falling to pieces," Phil said, glaring at the red-brick edifice. "Those bars on the windows look rusted through enough to pull right out."

"There's a brand new alarm system hooked up to those windows," Brown told us. "The bank's handling the payroll for that thing." He indicated the other side of the street with his thumb. For two blocks in either direction, the other side of the street was boarded up and in the process of being torn down.

"What's happening there?" I asked.

"Making way for a new city development. Crash program. Got a couple of thousand workers ripping those buildings down. That's the way it is, I guess. For fifty years the city didn't bother at all to touch this area; then all of a sudden they've got to rebuild it overnight."

"Yeah." Phil didn't seem too interested in the construction. "Well, let's get on inside and look at the damage."

We went up the steps of the brownstone, nodded to the cop at the door, then went around, under the staircase, and down to the cellar. The first room we came to, which was being used for storage and fire violations, was unscarred. The next room back contained Detective DeSilva, a blanket-covered

corpse, and signs of a violent explosion.

"About time you got here," DeSilva said, stubbing out his cigarette and lighting another.

"Nervous?" I asked him. "He won't hurt you."

With a brave show of nonchalance, I strolled over to the body and lifted the blanket. I won't describe it. If you've seen what a close-range explosion will do to a man, then there's no point. If you haven't, try not to. I replaced the blanket.

"It's not him that's making me nervous," DeSilva explained. "It's his relatives. They keep calling up and wanting to know when they can have the body, and why we're keeping it here. I told them it's the procedure in cases of violent death, and I said it has to go to the medical examiner for an autopsy first anyhow, but they seem to think that the department has a grudge against their family. His brother was here just before you came.

"He seemed more concerned with moving the body than with how he died."

"Who was he?" Phil asked, staring at the blanket.

"Hal!" DeSilva announced. He glared at Brown. "I should let you go back to the precinct to pick them up so you can brief them on the way over here. Ha! I'll bet you even ate lunch." He turned to us. "I appeal to you boys; was

Brown eating when you got there?"

"What makes you think you appeal to us?" I asked.

"I brought you a sandwich," Brown said, digging the peace offering out of his jacket pocket.

"Who was he," Phil repeated,

"Name's Rocke," DeSilva said, unwrapping the silver foil. "Jacob Rocke."

"What did he do."

"He got himself blown up, by person or persons unknown, motive unknown." DeSilva took a bite of his sandwich. "Chicken salad. Good."

"Very funny," Phil said. "What else did he do, like for a living?"

"He owned the building," DeSilva said. He gave us the rest of the background in between bites of sandwich. "He owned a lot of the buildings around here. Not nearly as many as any of the really big slumlords, of course, but quite a few. He was a better type than most of the building owners in this neighborhood, but that doesn't make him very good."

"He lived uptown. Usually only showed up down here to collect rents. He'd been coming here more than usual recently, as much as two or three times a week. He had a man painting and plastering the halls and some of the apartments, came down to check on him. I got that from a couple of the tenants."

"He came down yesterday evening after one of the tenants called

him to complain about the cold. I talked to his wife on the phone. She says he left home about nine-thirty. He blew himself up at just about two in the morning."

"Nine-thirty to two. That's a long time. Any idea what he was doing that long?"

"Not yet. It takes about a half hour to drive here from his house."

"Are you sure he drove down?" I asked.

"That's his Caddy parked outside—you must have seen it."

"Which tenant called?" Phil asked.

"His wife didn't know. We haven't questioned any of them yet, I suppose they'll tell us when we ask."

"I wouldn't bet on that," Phil said.

"Why do you say that?" Brown asked.

"Just a notion of mine. Have the lab men been here?"

"You know the routine," De-Silva said. "Photographed and fingerprinted early this morning, before anyone even thought it was homicide."

"Thank God for routine," Phil said.

"The meat wagon's outside," Brown said. "Can we let them have the stiff?"

"They can haul him away in a minute," Phil said, "just let me look around the room first." He started poking and sniffing around. "Anything look strange to you, Al?"

To keep Phil happy, I looked around the room. The way I see it, our job is to interview suspects; this Sherlock Holmes stuff of going over a room with a tape measure and a magnifying glass is for the lab boys. Not that Phil used a tape measure, but you know what I mean.

The focal point of the room was the boiler, or, what was left of it. A big old-fashioned cast iron steam boiler, it squatted in the center of the room. You could see the shiny oil burners in the furnace bottom, which had burned coal for many years before being converted to oil.

Around the room were the various objects one expects to find in a furnace room, and the inevitable few objects one is surprised to find. Around one side of the wall were rickety shelves holding old, rusty cans of long-since dry paint and twice-used nails. The frame of a bicycle, missing wheels, pedals, handle bar and seat, hung from the wall. There were aging parts from lamps, toasters, irons and objects the identity of which has been lost in the stream of history.

In the back, the area behind the boiler, the cement floor had been broken out and a mound of earth was badly tamped in its place.

"What happened there?" I asked, indicating the dirt.

"Oil tank installed there during the summer. I guess he never got

around to cementing the floor up again," DeSilva offered.

"And yet he was paying for a new paint job," Phil said. "Would you say this was an example of the perversity of human nature, or verification of my nasty suspicions?"

"Feel free to explain what you're talking about any time," I told Phil.

"The rear wall also," Phil said, "should not be overlooked. It offers an alternate possibility."

He was pointing to the back of the pile of dirt. There were a couple of shelves on the wall holding pieces of glassware that looked like they'd been part of a kid's chemistry set, and, below the shelves, leaning against the wall, four old, beat-up shovels.

"You've hit upon it, no doubt," I said. "Thanks for the explanation." I left the room to get the boys from the meat wagon while Phil examined his find.

LEAVING US IN charge of the investigation, Brown and DeSilva went off with the body. Phil and I started questioning the tenants of each apartment from the ground floor up. The ground floor front apartment had a brass plate on it that said SHWABE, and below that a neatly hand printed sign reading: *Knock loudly, I am deaf.* We knocked loudly. We knocked again, loudly.

The door opened to the extent

that a strong chain-latch would allow it, and a nose was thrust through the two-inch gap. "Yes?"

"Mrs. Shwabe?" I guessed.

"Yes?"

"We're from the police, ma'am," I said, showing my badge to the nose. We'd like to talk to you for a minute."

The nose investigated the badge carefully, noted the dullness of the metal and the missing stitching on the aged leather case, sniffed, and withdrew from the opening. The door closed, and there was the sound of a chain being released. Then the door was swung wide open.

"It's about time you got here, already," the thin, grey-haired owner of the nose said. She was a small woman, who looked to be well into her seventies. "So, come in already and let me close the door."

"Yes, Ma'am," Phil said, smiling. We entered the small living room, and she closed the door behind us, fastening lock, bolt and chain.

"You'd like a nice cup of tea, maybe?" she asked.

"We'd just like to ask you a few questions," I said.

"Sit down," she said, indicating an over-stuffed sofa, "the tea will be ready in just a moment."

She turned around and left the room.

We sat down. Phil leaned toward me.



"Deaf," he whispered.

"You think so?" I whispered back, "how can you tell?"

"The great mind never sleeps. Always turning over. Many outward signs, if but you knew where to look. I shall open a shop. Become the world's first consulting detective. Elementary."

"If she's deaf, why are you whispering?" I asked him. He glared at me.

Mrs. Shwabe came back into the room, hunched over a large tray. Phil jumped up to help her with it, but she shook her head.

"I've been doing this for fifty years, and I don't need help now," she said. Setting the tea tray down on a table, she sank into a large, ancient armchair across from the couch.

"I sent already a week ago for you to come," she said. "So what kept you?"

"I think there's some mistake," Phil said.

She nodded. "I see. How much sugar do you use?"

"Just a little," Phil said. She put two spoons of sugar into a cup, filled it two-thirds with tea, the last third with milk, and handed it to him.

"And you?"

"Two spoons, no milk, thank you," I told her.

"Milk's good for you," she said, repeating the process and handing me the cup. "Now," she said, sitting upright with her tea balanced

neatly on one knee, "about the chair—."

"The chair?" Phil asked, looking at me like this was my idea.

"So, what else did you come here for?"

"What chair?" I asked, shrugging at Phil.

"A week ago from Thursday already somebody steals my chair that I always sit on outside on the steps and talk to Mrs. Gruder from the building next door. You know Mrs. Gruder?"

We straightened that out as quickly as we could, promised her we'd get to work finding her chair, took down a description of the chair, and asked her about the landlord.

"Nice man," Mrs. Shwabe said.

"Yes?" Phil encouraged.

"All of a sudden, recently, he's a nice man. For thirty years he's been a louse, I shouldn't speak ill of the dead, then he reforms."

"What kind of louse, Mrs. Shwabe?" I asked.

She shrugged. "You know. An average landlord kind of louse."

No repairs. No hot water. No exterminator."

"But," Phil asked, leaning forward, "he changed?"

"He got very concerned. About the beginning of this summer. He started coming here regularly and bringing workmen with him. One time it took about a month; he had a plumber come in. Now we get hot water sometimes. He brought in an exterminator who's still carrying on a running fight with the roaches and rats. Now he's painting the hall. He was trying for the nice man award. And the interesting part," the old lady leaned forward, "is that almost every time one of these men came in to do anything, he had to be here to watch. Only, he didn't watch!"

"He didn't?" I asked.

"Not usually. Sometimes he'd spend a minute or two finding out how much whoever was working on whatever he was working on had done, but not usually. He even came here sometimes when there were no workmen here."

She leaned back smugly, content with herself. I had the feeling that she was soon going to tell us something.

"Did anyone move into the building at about the time Mister Rocke started to visit regularly?" Phil asked.

Mrs. Shwabe smiled.

"You're an intelligent boy," she told Phil. "A young lady moved into the second floor front."

"Was that the only one to move in?"

"It's the one you want to speak to. Second floor front. It says *apartment eleven* on the door." At that Mrs. Shwabe, evidently deciding that she'd told us enough, became stone deaf and couldn't understand any more of our questions.

We thanked her—loudly—and continued on our self appointed rounds.

"Second floor front next?" I asked Phil when we left her apartment.

"We'll get there," Phil said. "All in good time." He knocked on the next door.

There was no answer.

He knocked again.

"There just might," I offered, "be no one there."

Phil looked at his watch. "Possible," he agreed. "Although it does creep up on dinner time."

I checked the name on the door, "Perhaps Mister Smith is eating out tonight."

There was a tinkling sound from inside, and Phil renewed his banging on the door.

"Go away."

"This is the police, Mister Smith. We'd like to speak to you for a minute."

There was a low grumbling from inside the door, but after a second it swung open. A short man with a neat grey-brown beard peered out at us from the darkened apart-

ment. He was wrapped in a bath-robe from neck to shin.

"Speak, then go away. I'm trying to sleep."

"We're sorry to disturb you—" I began.

"Smitty!" Phil interrupted me sharply, "well, I'll be damned."

The little man looked up at Phil, blinking.

"I know you?" he asked.

"I used to see you regularly," Phil told him. "At social functions. The police lineup, things like that. Al, this is Boris Schmidt, one of the best of the old-time cracksmen. He's practically a living legend."

"It's a pleasure," Schmidt said, bowing slightly from the waist; but not sounding like he meant it.

Phil said, "One time, back in the late thirties, some bank in North Jersey advertised that their vault couldn't be broken into in less than three days—the idea being, of course, that it would never be left alone that long. Boris read the ad, drove up on a Saturday night, and opened the vault in less than an hour.

"Forty-two minutes," Boris volunteered.

"He was only caught because his car wouldn't start."

"I flooded the engine," Boris admitted. "Cars weren't as dependable in those days. That was quite a long time ago," he added sadly.

"I haven't seen you around for the past four or five years," Phil

said. "Where've you been keeping yourself?"

"I've retired," Boris said. "I moved down to Miami to spend my declining years in warmth and sunshine. When a man gets to be my age he starts thinking more of his own comfort and less about adventurous living."

"I suppose that's one way to describe bank robbing," Phil said. "Do you mind if I ask you what you're doing here?"

"I came up to get a last look at the city of my youth before it's gone completely, or I am. I spent the summer wandering around the streets at night, which is when the city comes alive; visiting all the old places that were left."

"Very touching," Phil said coldly, "any particular reason you picked this house?"

Boris Schmidt looked up at us and shrugged.

"Everybody's got to be somewhere," he said.

AND SO WE progressed from tenant to tenant until we reached apartment eleven, the second-floor front apartment which, because of the city code, was actually on the third floor. City law on tenement construction states that a building must have an elevator if it is more than six floors high. Therefore, to save their tenants the inconvenience of taking an elevator instead of a healthful climb up six flights of stairs, landlords call the

street-level floor the "ground floor," and start numbering above that.

It was my turn to knock, so I knocked. There was no answer. I put my ear to the door, and heard a dull murmur coming from inside. I knocked again, louder.

"It ain't locked," a female voice yelled.

I tried the door, but it wouldn't budge.

"It ain't unlocked," I yelled back.

"Push it hard," the voice from inside directed.

I set my shoulder against the door and pushed. The door stuck for a moment, and then sprung open, and I almost went on my face. The room's only occupant, a girl in her early twenties, didn't seem to notice. Phil came in behind me and shut the door. She didn't notice that either.

The apartment, or at least the living room, was furnished in an expensively ultra-modern style that seemed out of place in the building. The girl seemed out of place too. She was young, pretty, and carefully made up. She was sitting on a modern couch, wearing a bathrobe, with her feet tucked under her, staring at a television set that was blasting five feet from her. She had just glanced at us.

"Excuse me," I said.

"Did you see that?" She pointed at the set. "She didn't open the letter."

"We'd like to talk to you for a

few minutes, ask you a few questions."

"Her lover's in prison," the girl explained, "for a crime he didn't commit, and the real criminal has confessed in that letter, and she didn't open it."

I thought of a crime I'd like to commit, but rejected the idea as impractical.

"We're from the police," I said politely.

She looked up. "Yeah," she said. She selected an orange from a bowl by her side and started to peel it. "Wait a minute. The commercial starts in a minute. Sit down and watch."

Phil muttered something I won't repeat, stalked over to the television set and turned it off.

"Hey," the girl said, mad now, "what did you do that for?" She uncurled her legs and stood up, dropping the orange. She had nice legs.

"We'd like to ask you a few questions," Phil said, waving his badge in her face, "you can turn it back on when we're done."

"You could have waited until it was over," the girl complained, gathering her robe around her and sitting back down majestically.

"We're paid by the hour," Phil told her. "Just a couple of questions, it won't take long."

"What's your name?" I asked, taking out my notebook and ball-point.

The girl considered. "Mary," she said.

"Mary what?" As politely as I could manage.

"Mary Fay."

Phil smiled at her, but she wasn't impressed. "Are you an actress?" he asked. He sat down next to the couch in a contour chair that wobbled violently at his weight. After a shaky second he balanced. Phil has a good sense of balance. I kept standing.

"What kind of question's that?" Mary asked. "I'm a model. I work for Priscilla Juniors on Seventh Avenue and Thirty-ninth Street."

I wondered at Mary's sudden desire to inform; then I realized: she didn't want us to think she was one of those nasty girls that call themselves models to hide a less reputable profession. She was a real honest-to-gosh clothes horse.

"I just thought," Phil explained, "that Mary Fay might be your stage name. You're good looking, and have the poise of a professional actress."

I resolved to call Phil a liar the first chance I got, but Mary ate it up.

"Nothing like that," she said, smiling at Phil, "it's on my birth certificate. Mary Fay, daughter of Clarence Fay."

"Good enough," Phil said. "You make good money as a model?"

"Not bad," she said. "Say, how come all these questions?" It seemed to have just occurred to her.

"We're investigating the death of the landlord," Phil told her.

"Mister Rocke? That's what I figured, but how come this kind of questions?"

"Why not?" Phil asked.

"I mean, you don't need this kind of stuff for an accident report."

"You think it was an accident?" Phil asked.

That stopped her. She looked at Phil, and then at me, and then back at Phil. She thought about it, considering it from all angles. Then she decided what Phil meant, and she didn't like it.

"You got any reason to think it wasn't?" she demanded.

"We have a good reason to think it might not have been," Phil told her. She liked that even less. She set her jaw, and stared at the far wall.

"Have you got anything to tell us?" Phil asked. She shook her head.

"You know," Phil said, using his most sincere tone of voice, "if it turns out that it wasn't an accident, you'll be the main suspect. Now, personally I don't think you could have had anything to do with it, but I'm not sure I can convince the lieutenant. After all, we'll have to arrest somebody."

"Me?"

"That's right," Phil told her. "You were the landlord's mistress, weren't you?" Sometimes Phil takes big jumps.

"Now look," the girl said, deciding she'd been insulted, "who on earth told you that?"

"Almost everybody in the building," Phil exaggerated. The girl looked at me for support, but I merely looked stern.

She went back to Phil. "What did they tell you?"

Phil took out his notebook and consulted a page at random. "That Mister Rocke was paying your rent. That his frequent visits to the building, supposedly to check on the repairs, were actually to see you." He closed the notebook quickly. "Things like that."

"Now look," Mary said, tucking her legs back under her and shaking a finger at Phil. "Supposing it's true? I mean, just supposing? That doesn't mean I killed him. I mean, wouldn't it mean that I had no reason at all? I mean, now I'll have to pay my own rent—if he really was doing that—so why should I want to kill him?"

"We don't know," Phil admitted. "That's the kind of thing that we'd have to get information on. Maybe you two just had a fight. Maybe he was going to kick you out anyway. Maybe you were threatening to tell his wife. We'll have to check on it."

"I'll say!" Mary said. "I mean, there's nothing to that at all. I might as well admit that Mister Rocke and I were friends, since you seem to know all about that anyhow, but we never had any fights or anything."

"Have you got any idea who might have wanted to kill him?" Phil asked.

Mary thought for a minute. "Even if I did," she said finally, "I couldn't tell you. That would be like accusing someone of murder. I couldn't do a thing like that." From the way she said it, she wanted to be persuaded that it was her civic duty to tell us.

"It's your civic duty to tell us," I said.

"His wife," Mary told us.

"What's that?"

"His wife, she killed him."

"Why do you think his wife killed him?" I asked.

"She hated him. He used to tell me all the time how his wife hated him."

"She didn't understand him, maybe?" I offered.

Mary glared at me. "It's not funny. She hated him. I didn't understand him, but she hated him."

"What do you mean," Phil asked, "you didn't understand him?"

Mary shrugged. "He was funny. Like he didn't want to look at television. He used to read books. Look, come here, I'll show you something." She got up and walked across the room, her slippers flopping against the rug. Phil and I followed.

"Here," she said. She opened a closet door and stood aside.

We looked in. The closet had been converted into a book storage bin. It had been divided by shelves, and was overflowing with books and magazines; mostly paperbacks,

but with a sprinkling of hardcovers.

I picked up a handful and looked them over. *Murderer's Mail*, *The Case of the Zookeeper's Gnu*, *She Died a Blonde*, they were all like that; mysteries, detective stories, spy novels.

"You mean that's what he did when he came over here," Phil asked, looking over the selection, "read mysteries?"

"Well," Mary said, "that's one of the things he did. I mean," she blushed, something I hadn't seen in years, "he did, well, other things too."

Phil waved that away with a gesture. "I'm not interested in your sex life. I hope it was very happy. I'm interested in the books. Why did he read over here?"

She shrugged again. "He liked to read. I could never figure it out either."

"Yes, but why here? Why not at home? He must have done most of his reading at home, why not all of it? I'm sure he had better things to do over here."

Mary didn't get insulted at that one.

"Oh, no," she said. "He did all of his reading over here. His wife wouldn't let him bring any of these books home. She said they were trashy, and didn't want them around the house. Said they were a bad influence on the kids."

"That's cute," Phil said. "Only read higher literature, I guess."

"She didn't read anything, ever.

At least, that's what Mister Rocke told me. He used to get very mad about it. He told me that the only two pleasures in his life he got in this apartment." This time she didn't blush.

"Did his wife know about his coming over here? I don't mean coming to the building, I mean coming to see you."

"I don't think so," Mary said. "But I didn't think the neighbors knew about it either, so I guess I'm not very observant. If she killed him she must have known about it."

"That's putting the cart in front of the horse," Phil said.

"Huh?"

"Never mind." Phil got up. "We'd like to thank you for your assistance. We'll continue checking. If you think of anything that might help, let us know please."

He gave her a card, and we both retreated toward the door. As we went out, Mary switched on the television.

"That was quite a jump you made in there," I said over my shoulder, trotting down the staircase with Phil breathing on my neck.

"Jump?"

"You know what I mean. That bit about the girl being Rocke's mistress."

"Yeah," Phil agreed. "Well, it seemed likely, and if I was wrong I'm sure she would have told me about it."

"Loudly," I agreed. We went

outside and down the brownstone steps to the street. "Where to now?"

"Let's go in and make a preliminary report."

"What about interviewing the wife?"

"After dinner," Phil said, climbing into the car.

"My wife," I told Phil, "expects me home for dinner."

"Call her," Phil said. "I'll buy you a steak."

I called her.

Back in the squad room we—I—typed up the preliminary. Phil finished his double-crostic and then stared at the ceiling. He made a phone call, talked about explosives with someone, and then went back to staring at the ceiling.

"Ready for dinner?" I asked.

"Are we done?"

"We," I told Phil, "have finished typing our report. I'm using the editorial we."

"Don't snarl," Phil said, "it's not an attractive sound. Are *we* ready to eat *our* dinner?"

"We are."

"We," Phil told me as we walked down the street to Blake's Steak House, "have solved the case."

"We have?"

"I use the regal we," Phil said.

"All right," I said, "you have?"

"We have," Phil affirmed.

"Very good," I commended him. "Who did it?"

"Did what?"

"I don't know what the name of the game is," I told Phil, "but I'll

only play if you tell me the rules. Who committed the murder?"

"I thought that's what you meant," Phil said, looking smug. "Nobody."

I refused to dignify that comment with an answer, so I said nothing. As I still wasn't talking when the waiter came around to take our order, I had to point to the menu and make gestures, but the waiter was very understanding. He must have thought I was a deaf mute.

"Stop sulking," Phil said, after the waiter had left.

"I'm not sulking," I told Phil loudly. "But I should."

"Keep your voice down," Phil said.

"You really think you have this thing solved, don't you?" I whispered to Phil.

"I believe that I know what happened, and who caused it."

"We haven't interviewed the wife yet," I reminded him.

"No, and thank God we won't have to. From what we've heard of her, I don't think I could take it."

"I agree," I told him. "Okay, let's have it. What did happen?"

"Think it over while we enjoy our steaks," Phil said.

"Think what over?" I grumbled, getting slightly irritated.

Phil laughed. "I call your attention to the condition of the furnace room, and more particularly to its contents," he said.

"Is there anything else to which you would call my attention?" I

asked in as sarcastic a tone as I could manage.

"Yes," Phil said, as the waiter put two sizzling hot platters down in front of us. "To these steaks."

I agreed.

The steaks were good, and I concentrated on them rather than on Phil's hints. I'm not saying I would have caught on anyway, but I actually didn't think about them. When Phil announces that he has solved something I tend to just relax and watch. He's usually right—like I said earlier, he's the luckiest cop I know.

After dinner Phil yawned and stretched.

"We'd better wrap it up," he said. I followed him out to the car, and we started off.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

"You haven't figured it out yet?"

"I have the utmost confidence in you," I told him.

"I should make you put that in writing," Phil said. We drove down to the ninth precinct, where Phil waited in the car, and I made my way up the old, wooden stairs to the detectives' room.

DeSilva and Brown had, as all sensible cops will when off duty, gone home. Holding down the fort was a plainclothes policeman named Henderson, an old-time ready-to-retire sergeant that Phil and I had worked with before and liked.

There is, incidently, a difference between a detective and a plain-



clothes policeman. A detective works out of the bureau of detectives, whatever precinct he's assigned to. He is appointed from the regular police by the chief of detectives, and taken off the civil service rolls.

A plainclothes policeman is just that: a regular cop on assignment to work in civies. He can be put back on uniform duty at any time by his lieutenant. Detectives have a different pay grade, and usually are making a little more money than the equivalent grade of cop. To make up for this, they can be fired at the displeasure of the chief of detectives, the chief of police, or the mayor. Regular cops are civil service, and it takes a board of enquiry to fire them.

Henderson said he'd be glad to

go with us, and where were we going? I told him that he'd find out, and just come along.

Henderson settled himself in the back of the car and said hello to Phil.

"It's a pleasure to work with you boys again," he told us. "Every time you two show up something interesting happens. My hair turns a bit greyer, and I have another story to tell my grandchildren."

"I didn't know you had grandchildren," I told him.

"I don't, not yet," Henderson said, "but my youngest daughter got married last week, and I'm sure that within the year it'll be taken care of."

WE DROVE to Tudor Street, and parked about a block away from the brownstone. Phil took a crowbar out of the back of the car, and we started toward the house.

"What's happening?" Henderson asked.

"We are going to the scene of the crime," I told him, "on the theory that the criminal always returns to same."

"Particularly when the crime hasn't been committed yet," Phil added.

Henderson looked at me, and I shrugged.

Phil stopped at the shed next to the building and examined the door.

"This," I told Henderson distinctly, "is a department of sanita-

tion shed. The building we want is next door."

"True," Phil admitted. "Notice how the shed abuts the buildings on both sides." He put the crowbar into the padlock hasp and twisted.

"Hey!" Henderson said. "You got a warrant to do that?"

"It's not private property," Phil told him. "It belongs to the city. As a duly appointed city employee, I am going to examine it. You two are going to come along to make sure I don't steal any carts or brooms."

He gave the crowbar a sharp twist, and the hasp separated from the door. "Let us continue," Phil said, "inside."

We entered the dusty shed and closed the door behind us.

"Have you got a flashlight?" Phil asked Henderson.

"Sure thing," Henderson said, "but the light switch should be somewhere over here." He felt along one of the walls by the door.

"We won't need it," Phil said. "Just turn on your flashlight so we can see where we are."

Henderson switched on his little pocket flash, and we made our way across the dusty floor, carefully avoiding street-cleaning carts, until we reached the far wall.

"What time is it?" Phil asked.

With the aid of Henderson's light, I looked at my wristwatch.

"About nine-fifteen," I told him.

"I don't know how long we'll have to wait, but we might as well

make ourselves comfortable," Phil said, squatting down on the floor with his back against the wall.

"This place is filthy," I said, sitting down amidst a cloud of dust.

"Street cleaner, cleanse thyself," Phil said. "Don't move around so much and you won't raise so much dust."

Henderson settled comfortably next to us. "Would one of you gentlemen like to tell me what's going on?" he asked.

"A splendid idea," I said. "Phil, tell him what's going on."

"Keep your voices down," Phil said. "What we're doing is playing the percentages. If I'm right, and I think I am, sometime tonight we should—*hush!*"

From the righthand side of the room there was the sound of stone being scraped across stone. It continued for some seconds.

"Whatever happens," Phil whispered to us, "don't do or say anything until I give you the signal."

We obeyed his injunction, and sat there like stone monkeys peering into the gloom. For some time after that initial sound there was nothing, and then, with a sudden cracking sound, a shaft of light sprang up from the corner and illuminated a square patch of ceiling.

There was a distant muttering of voices; then a shadow figure appeared on the ceiling screen, to move out of view in a second and be followed by two more. Three men were now sharing the shed with us.

Fighting down a tremendous impulse to sneeze, brought on by the dust, I held my breath while the three men made their way across the room. There, they held another short whispered conversation, and then the sound of stone on stone was repeated. This lasted about ten minutes, and the sound of muttering



voices gradually receded into the wall.

About five minutes after that, Phil touched my arm, I touched Henderson's and the three of us started quietly across the room. All three of the intruders had disappeared into a neat square hole in the brickwork of the wall. Phil pulled his revolver from the shoulder holster.

"Follow me—quietly," he said.

I drew my own gun, feeling just as silly as I always do when I have to draw my gun, and followed Phil into the hole. Henderson came close behind me.

The hole turned out to be a tunnel that went down at a steep angle,

straightened out, and then went up again. The total length of the tunnel seemed to be about fifteen feet. Phil climbed cautiously out at the other end, and then stood aside for me. I climbed out and joined him, more concerned that I had probably ruined my suit crawling through the tunnel than worried about the three gentlemen ahead of us.

But that was only momentary. When Henderson had joined us, and we were ready to go ahead, I decided that I didn't feel so silly holding my revolver.

The room, or whatever we had entered, was pitch black, and we stood there for a moment trying to figure out which way to go. Then we heard the murmur of voices ahead of us, and we felt our way cautiously forward and around a corner to the left. Then there was light.

In front of us, about twenty feet down what seemed to be a narrow corridor, lit by the muted glow of a single penlight, were three men. Two of them were kneeling by a huge vault door set into the end of the corridor, and the third was on his feet a short way back, holding the penlight that provided the only illumination.

The next few moments passed very quickly.

"Hold it right there!" Phil suddenly barked. For a shocked second, all motion froze. Then the action started.

The light went out, and Hender-

son's flashlight went on. The standing man dived at us, and Henderson clipped him on the side of the head with his revolver. He went down. The other two men raised their hands and stood up, a study in slow motion. They looked bewildered.

"Hello Smitty," Phil said, walking forward. "Who are your friends?"

We took them to the precinct and gave them to the desk sergeant to take care of for the night. Then we went upstairs and Henderson led the way to the special supplies locker and pulled out a bottle of Scotch.

"A very good job you've done," he said, filling three water glasses with a respectable amount of the amber liquid.

"It's Phil," I said. "He had a brain storm." I turned to the skinny genius. "All right, let's hear it."

Phil settled back in an old swivel chair and held his tumbler of Scotch up to the light. "Do you remember what Brown said to us as we drove over to the scene?"

"He said a lot of things," I said.

"About the explosive used," Phil specified.

"Yeah. He said it was either dynamite or nitro, and he was betting on dynamite."

"Right," Phil said. "He was betting on dynamite because, as he said, 'who would want to play with nitroglycerine?'"

"That's right," I remembered.

"Safecrackers, that's who. Especially an old-time cracksman like Smitty. So there we were, with an old-timer like Smitty in one building and an old bank with a brand-new and rather large payroll in its old vault—in another, separated by a shed that's unoccupied at night."

"I see," I said, "it's—"

"Very simple," Phil finished for me. "A couple of diggers to prepare a tunnel into the bank, wait until a Thursday night when the payroll money is in the vault for two thousand construction workers Friday morning, then blast and run. Of course you've got to prepare your nitro a couple of days in advance, but you've got a beautiful unused furnace to store it in."

"Then comes the accident," I said.

"Right. The most unexpected.

The landlord, who would never do nothing for nobody, has a girl friend in the building. She gets cold one night. 'Honey, I'm cold.' Honey goes downstairs to turn on the furnace. *Blam.* An accident."

"But they go on with their scheme?"

"Sure. The cops are running around looking for a motive for murder, not bank robbery. Smitty makes up a quick emergency supply of nitro and they go to it. If it wasn't for a cop who was lucky enough to notice some shovels in the back of the furnace room, some chemical glassware above the shovels, and a guy named Smitty, and put the pieces together, they would have gotten away with it."

"Right," I told Phil Stone, raising my Scotch in toast. "You're the luckiest cop I know."

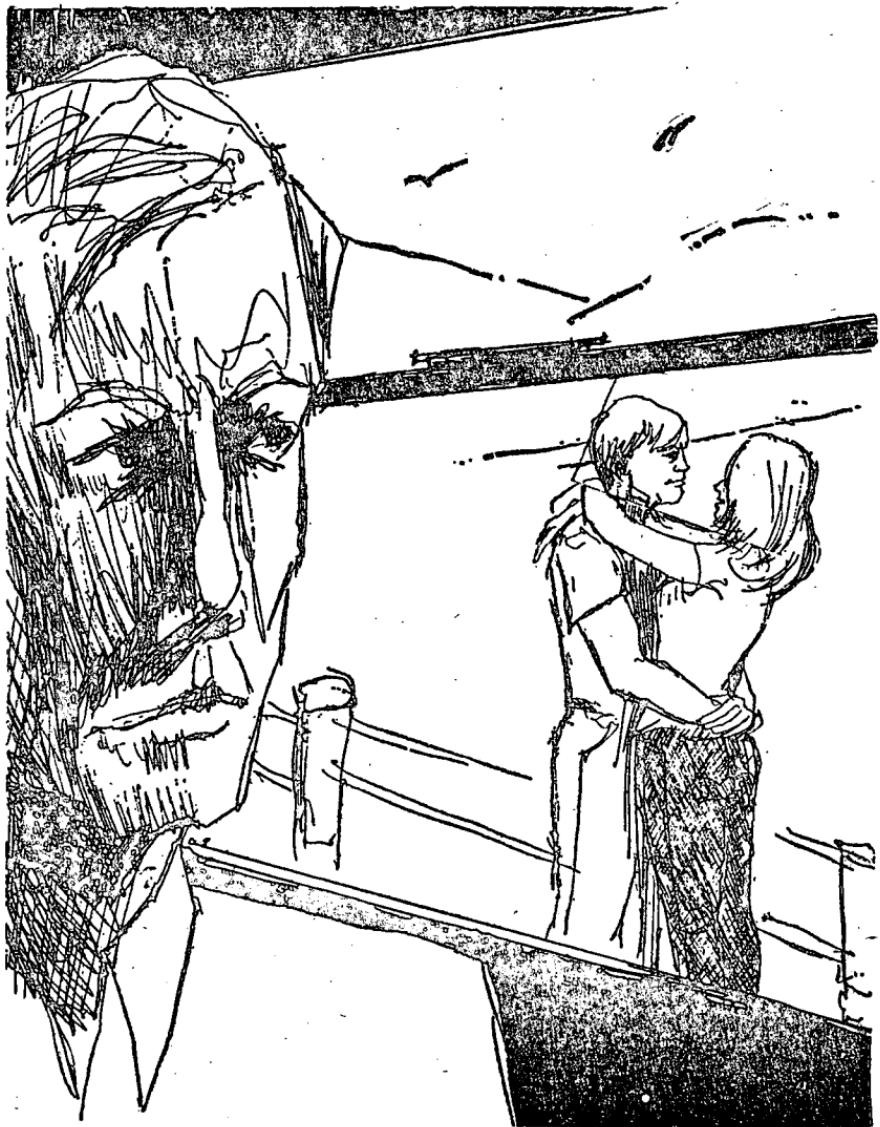
In the Next Issue

THE CLEAN-CUT MURDER

By ED LACY

This man we were looking for was a good one. No record, no bad habits, nothing. There was nothing to make him stand out. Except he happened to be extremely dead. . . . Don't miss this exciting short story.

THE BOUNTY HUNTERS



A NEW, EXCITING NOVELET

"You'll stay here," the man told Halleran.

"The girl and the other guy comes with us.

*When we come back, maybe the girl will be
with us. The guy—dead men don't talk . . ."*

by FRANK GRUBER



THE ISOLATED Mexican mountain country is very hard on the *Norte Americanos*. The air is rarified, the sun is extremely hot and the few roads are no more than mountain trails.

Halleran had about had it. He had been walking since early morning and it had been uphill for the past two hours. He had been told that there was a village ahead,

but he knew that it was at least a dozen miles further, and he did not think he could make it. Not before nightfall, if then.

Another traveler had apparently come to the same conclusion. He sat at the side of the trail, his back against a boulder, his knees bunched up.

Halleran assumed that he was a Mexican, but as he approached

he realized that the man, or youth, for he was no more than nineteen or twenty, was an American like himself.

Halleran stopped near the seated youth, fished out his handkerchief and mopped his face.

"Long way from home," he remarked.

The youth looked at him, made no reply. His eyes were hostile. In his misery, he obviously preferred to be alone.

Halleran persisted, "There's supposed to be a town along here somewhere. Any idea how far?"

The young man still did not respond verbally, but he got to his feet. Halleran heard it then, too, the grinding of a vehicle in gear. He looked back down the trail. The nose of the oldest, most dilapidated bus he had ever seen was appearing from around a turn.

Steam was hissing from the radiator; the motor panted and the gears ground painfully. But the bus made it to where Halleran and the boy were standing beside the road.

The driver brought his mechanical relic to a halt. He leaned toward the already open door and bared his teeth.

"San Jose del Mochis, une peso," he said invitingly.

"Beats walking," said Halleran, moving forward.

With one foot on the step, he looked over his shoulder. The youth still stood beside the road,

but meeting Halleran's look, he shrugged and came toward the bus.

Halleran paid the driver and sat down by the window, on a vacant double seat. The youth who followed continued on, seating himself beside a plump Mexican woman who clutched a speckled rooster to her bosom.

There was other livestock on the bus, a dog, a goose and a caged kinkajou, held by an Indian boy.

The bus ground its way along the trail that was extremely perilous. At best the road was scarcely wide enough for the vehicle. At its worst, the bus practically scraped rock and shale on the right side and the wheels on the left now and then threatened to skid entirely off the road.

The driver seemed completely oblivious to the condition of the road and kept the bus wheezing and grinding along. After a while the road seemed to peter out entirely, but then passing between two huge piles of stock and shale, the destination was suddenly revealed.

The village of *San Jose del Mochis* was sprawled out before the bus. It was a miserable collection of adobe shacks and sheds, dominated by a combination *cantina-store*, with an attached shed.

The bus ground and wheezed to a stop before the *cantina-store* and the passengers descended.

Halleran's eyes picked out an American who was sprawled on a

bench beside the door of the *cantina*. He was a beetle-browed, unshaven man of about forty. He wore a begrimed linen suit that had been white a long time ago. The coat was partly open, revealing a shoulder holster.

The man was watching the bus behind Halleran, from which the young man Halleran had met on the road was now descending. Halleran started to turn and a bundle of energy swept past him. It was a blonde girl, wearing tight Levis and a checked shirt. She was about eighteen or nineteen, and was rushing toward the young American.

Halleran saw the consternation on the youth's face as he saw the girl coming toward him. He heard, too, the poignancy in her tone as she called him by name.

"Tommy! Tommy. . . !"

She went sobbing into Tommy's arms.

The man in the dirty white suit said, "Friend of yours?"

Halleran shrugged. "I never saw him until a half hour ago."

"Girl's been here since yesterday," continued the man in the dirty linen suit. He made a small gesture. "Kid looks like he's on the lam."

"One thing you're not," said Halleran, unable to keep contempt out of his tone, "is a lawman."

"How would you know?" the seated man grunted.

Halleran went into the *cantina*. The merchandise in the store was

meager and of poor quality. The customers, at the moment, were all on the *cantina* side. They consisted of a small group of Mexicans playing cards at a table and an American draped over the far end of the crude bar.

A very fat, perspiring Mexican moved up. "Buenos días, Señor."

"Tequila," said Halleran, putting a peso on the bar.

The bartender brought the *tequila* and moved up the salt and a dirty saucer containing the chunks of lemon.

Halleran bit into the lemon, licked the salt from his hand and tossed off the *tequila*.

"You drank that like you're used to it," observed the man along the bar.

Halleran made a wry face. "I hate the stuff. What I'd really like is a big, cold glass of beer."

"Pancho," shouted the American to the man behind the bar, "you hear the man? Why don't you fetch in a barrel of beer?"

"Cost too much to bring here," said the bartender. "My people like *tequila*. Sometimes *pulque*."

"Pulque!" the American spat. "That stuff ain't fit for a white man's stomach. More I see of this damn country, less I like it. Wasn't for our business . . ."

He broke off as the man in the dirty linen suit came into the *cantina*.

Halleran saw the quick look the two Americans had exchanged and

watched both men leave the *cantina* by the rear door.

The bartender said quietly, "Bad *hombres*, those two."

Halleran took note of the fresh bruise on the man's face.

"If I had a cash register," he said, "I certainly wouldn't let them near it."

"The few *pesos* I have would not interest them," said the bartender. "All time they read the—what you call—the reward poster."

A small shock that was like a warning signal went through Halleran.

"Where do they get these reward posters?" he asked quietly.

"They don't get—they have them always."

Halleran's eyes went to the front door. He hesitated, then went to the door and stepped out. The boy, Tommy, and his girl were still near the bus. They were holding hands and talking earnestly, although they were too far away for Halleran to make out their words.

The man with the white linen suit was coming around the corner of the *cantina*, on Halleran's right. He had a snub-nosed revolver in his hand. His eyes were fixed on the young couple near the bus.

Halleran heard shoes crunch gravel to his left and shot a quick look in that direction. The second American was coming from the shed. He carried a .32 automatic, but it was dangling from his hand.

Halleran knew the two men then

for what they were—bounty hunters.

The man in the linen suit was thirty feet from the boy and girl. He stopped.

"Your name Langford?" he called.

The boy reacted violently. He released the girl's hands, took a step away from her.

"What's it to you?" he demanded.

"Somebody back in Alabama wants you," replied the man in the white linen suit.

The girl cried out: "It's not true! Nobody wants him!"

The man with the gun grinned wolfishly. "I got a reward poster says they want you, five hundred dollars' worth."

The man on Halleran's left called out: "Dead or alive!"

Tommy Langford backed away. His eyes shot from the man on the left to the man on the right. "Nobody's taking me!"

The girl tried to go to him, but he waved her off.

"Keep away, Betty," he cautioned her. His right hand hovered over the right jacket pocket.

The man in the linen suit began moving forward. "Make your play, kid. Don't make no difference to us."

"Yeah, reach," called his partner mockingly. "Reach for your hardware."

"Don't, Tommy, don't," pleaded the girl desperately. "They'll kill

you. Please don't—" Impulsively she started for him again.

Young Langford cried out in anguish. "Don't shoot! I surrender." His hands went up.

The two men closed in on him. The man in the linen suit whipped the gun from the youth's jacket pocket and his partner brought out a pair of handcuffs and snapped them about the boy's wrists.

Then the man in the linen suit smiled wolfishly and cracked the boy in the face with his snub-nosed revolver, cupped in his palm.

"That's for givin' us trouble," he said dispassionately.

Blood spurted from the boy's face as he reeled back. The girl rushed in, but the second bounty hunter reached out, shoved her away so violently that she was thrown to her knees.

Halleran moved forward, his hands jammed into the pockets of his coat.

"That's about your speed," he said. "A half-grown whelp and a girl."

The two bounty hunters whirled on Halleran. Both noted the position of Halleran's hands.

"Don't bite off more'n you can spit out," snapped the man in the linen suit. "We do this for a livin' and we don't take kindly to interference."

"Scavengers," said Halleran contemptuously.

"The kid's worth five hundred, delivered to the border," said the



second bounty hunter. "That's a lot of money down here."

The first one said, "You don't look like no tourist to me, but we ain't got a make on you we know of. That's your good luck."

The second bounty hunter said, "Come on, Sligo. It's two hundred miles to *Agua Frieta*. I don't like driving these roads at night."

The man called Sligo struck Tommy Langford with the flat of his hand.

"Move, punk!" He pointed toward a car that had seen its best days eight or ten years ago.

The girl sobbing, followed the trio to the car.

"Please don't take him," she begged the two bounty hunters. "It wasn't his fault what he did in Alabama. I'm to blame. We'd had a quarrel and he went out and got drunk."

They passed out of earshot of Halleran, who was moving back to the *cantina*. He stopped near the door, however.

The bounty hunters were pushing Tommy Langford into the rear

seat of the car. The girl tried to get in with him, but Sligo shoved her roughly aside. He climbed in with Tommy and his partner got in behind the wheel. The ancient car leaped forward.

Betty ran after it a few feet, then realized the futility of that and, whirling, came running toward Halleran.

"Please help me," she pleaded. "They—they won't take him back alive. It was only a fight over me, but the boy that was killed, his father's the district attorney and he's offered the reward for Tommy, dead or alive. He wants him dead because a jury'd be sure to acquit Tommy."

She fumbled in a pocket. "I've got money. I'll give it to you. All I've got. Here!" She thrust a thin packet of bills at Halleran.

"What good's money?" asked Halleran. "They've got a car."

The girl looked wildly around, saw the shed attached to the *cantina*-store and ran toward it.

A man was working on a heap that was at least five years older than the one driven off by the bounty hunters.

Halleran, watching, saw the girl pleading with the automobile mechanic. Her plea was successful, for the man suddenly took the money from her. He slammed down the hood of the car, picked up a red can of gasoline. He began emptying it into the gas tank. Betty climbed into the car.

Halleran exclaimed angrily and strode over to the "garage."

"Don't be a bigger fool than you have to be," he snapped at the girl. "You saw those men in action. They're killers."

"I don't care. I've got to go," the girl cried. "There is no one to help Tommy, no one but me."

"Even if you don't get killed with this junkpile," said Halleran, "what do you think those human scavengers will do to you? You're young, pretty."

"I don't care," the girl said, "I don't care what they do to me. If I can help Tommy—"

"You can't," snapped Halleran. "They're armed and they've got your boy friend handcuffed. They'll have their sport with you and they'll still take Tommy to the border—"

The mechanic had finished dumping the gasoline into the tank. He stepped aside and the girl started the motor and began to back the car out of the shed.

As she braked to shift into forward, Halleran tore open the car door.

"Move over," he said savagely.

She stared at him, sudden hope coming into her eyes. She slid over and he climbed in beside her.

He slammed the stick shift into second, jammed down on the accelerator. The ancient heap sprang forward and Halleran shifted into high. He almost stripped the gears and then was angry that he had

not. It would have put an end to this foolishness.

A knock in the motor was almost immediately apparent, but Halleran kept his foot heavy on the accelerator.

He did not look at the girl, but he knew that her eyes were on him. After a moment she said, "That's a gun in your coat pocket, isn't it?"

He took his right hand from the wheel and slapped the side of his coat closer to his body.

She said: "You're not a detective?"

He snorted. "What good would an American detective do here in Mexico? He'd have no authority."

"But you're not like those men, Sligo and Maas?"

"How come you know their names?" asked Halleran.

"I got to *San Jose del Mochis* yesterday. They were already there. They tried to pump me about Tommy. I didn't tell them anything, but they guessed, or already knew. Tommy wrote to me, asking me to write him at *San Jose del Mochis*. I did, but then I decided to come. What I can't understand is how those men knew about Tommy."

"They read your mail," said Halleran carelessly. "*San Jose del Mochis* is off the main road. Tourists don't come to it. Just people like Sligo and Maas. And your Tommy."

"*You* came there!" Ripening suspicion was in her tone.

"And people like me," Halleran said.

"Who are *you*?" she asked.

"Who doesn't matter. It's *what* I am that you want to know." He shrugged. "I guess you might say I'm traveling the back roads for the same reason as your friend Tommy."

She stared at him.

THE ROAD TAKEN by the bounty hunters and their victim was not the one by which Halleran had come to *San Jose del Mochis*. This trail seemed to run more directly north than the other one. But it was a miserable excuse of a road, even poorer than the one Halleran had trudged along all morning.

It was less traveled than the other road and seemed to run more along the winding ridge top of the razor-back mountain. The sun had already been low in the West when Halleran and Betty Morgan had started in pursuit of the other car. It would be dark in a half hour and Halleran, hoping to overtake the bounty hunters, kept his foot heavy on the accelerator.

The condition of the road did not warrant the speed at which he was driving, which was actually seldom over thirty-five miles an hour, due to the poor state of the motor.

They had gone barely seven or eight miles when they came abruptly upon their quarry. Halleran made a sharp turn in the road

and then had to jerk the wheel violently to keep from ramming the bounty hunters' car, which was stopped in the middle of the road with a broken wheel.

Halleran's hands were occupied with the wheel, for he had to brake abruptly and keep from going over an embankment at the same time. He brought the car to a halt and the two bounty hunters were upon him, their guns in their hands.

"Well, if this ain't a sight for sore eyes!" cried the man Betty Morgan had identified as Maas.

"Sir Galahad to the rescue," jeered Sligo. He gestured with his gun. "Out!"

Halleran was fairly caught. He opened the car door and stepped down to the rocky road. Maas jammed his gun into his side and, whisking open his coat, whipped the .32 automatic from the side pocket.

Betty was scrambling out of the car on the far side. Sligo, moving quickly, intercepted her as she rushed to the bounty hunters' car, beside which Tommy Langford was standing. She fought Sligo.

"Let me go, let me go, you—you beast!" she cried.

"I like a woman who puts up a fight," Sligo said. "Makes the meat taste better." He suddenly released Betty as Tommy Langford sprang toward him, his manacled hands raised high.

Sligo fired at the youth, missing

deliberately, but sending the bullet close enough to Langford to stop his rush.

"Next one's for keeps," Sligo said. "Like we told you before, the reward's the same, hot or cold."

"Speaking of cold," said Maas, "it's gonna be damn cold tonight. We could use something to keep us warm when we camp." His eyes were on Betty Morgan.

Sligo grinned. "I see what you mean." To Betty: "All right, little lady, you've sold me a bill of goods. You can ride along with us, all the way to the Rio Grande." He stepped to the side of Betty's car and opened the rear door.

Maas said, "Wait a minute, Sligo. We got an extra man here." He indicated Halleran.

Sligo regarded Halleran through slitted eyes. "He could walk back to the greaser town in a couple of hours. They ain't got no phone there, but somebody could get down to the valley country in eight or ten hours." He shrugged. "It kinda looks like your luck ran out, Americano."

Halleran shrugged. "You cheap two-bit bounty hunters, you're so used to scrambling for pennies you wouldn't recognize a twenty-dollar gold piece if you had one in your fist."

Sligo raised his snub-nosed .38. "Keep shooting off your mouth, if it helps."

"Shoot," snarled Halleran. "She's a nice piece of fluff and she'll

help you forget the five thousand dollars you let slip through your dirty hands."

The revolver remained pointed steadily at Halleran. But Sligo did not pull the trigger. Halleran counted one, two . . . and then Sligo said, "What five thousand dollars?"

"*You've* got the reward posters," said Halleran. "Not me. Isn't there one for a man named O'Hara?"

Sligo's eyes remained steadily on Halleran. But Maas took a couple of steps forward. "That's the fella in Minnesota killed his wife."

"So what?" said Sligo.

But Halleran noticed that the muzzle of the .38 was no longer pointed at his heart.

"What's O'Hara look like?" snapped Halleran.

"Six feet tall," said Maas. "'Bout a hundred and eighty." He stopped. "I got the make here somewhere."

He reached into a pocket and brought a sheaf of grimy reward posters. He began running through them, stopped at one. "Thought I remembered it. Yeah, six eet, hundred and eighty. But it says black hair, parted on the left."

"Blond, crew-cut," Halleran said. "O'Hara was a lawyer. He'd know enough to change his appearance. Doesn't it also say he had a crescent-shaped scar an inch and a half on his left hand?"

Halleran held out his hand, clenched into a fist. Sligo took a

half step forward, dropped his eyes for an instant to Halleran's hand. Then he stepped quickly back.

"He's got the scar!"

Maas moved forward to verify the scar on Halleran's hand. "Be damned!" he exclaimed. "We got us a little gold mine."

"They want O'Hara alive," snapped Halleran.

"For five thousand," said Sligo, "we'll take you all the way to Minnesota ourselves. Even though we ain't awful crazy to cross the Rio Grande." He reached under his coat with his free hand, brought out a pair of handcuffs. "Hold out them golden hands nice and easy."

Maas moved up behind Halleran and jammed Halleran's own .32 into the small of his back. Halleran held out his hands. Sligo snapped one of the cuffs about Halleran's left wrist, then suddenly reached out and, catching the girl, jerked her close.

He snapped the second cuff about her right wrist.

Betty Morgan tried to jerk away from Halleran.

"I don't want to be handcuffed to a—a wife murderer!" Her eyes blazed at Halleran.

"As to that," said Halleran harshly, "your Tommy's wanted for murder, isn't he?"

"He didn't try to kill anyone," cried Betty. "He had a fist fight with Joel Carson. Joel fell and bumped his head. It wasn't murder, it was an accident."

"Of course," said Halleran, "that makes a difference."

"All right, all right," Sligo chor-tled. "You pigeons can argue it out on the way. It's time we got moving." He gestured to Tommy Langford. "Back seat for you, laddie boy. You two," indicating Betty and Halleran, "in front so I can keep an eye on you."

Trying to keep as far from Halleran as possible, Betty got into the front seat of the car. Halleran followed, closing the right door after him. His left hand touched Betty's on the seat. She drew her hand away to the extent of the short handcuff chain.

Maas got in behind the wheel. He started the motor.

Sligo, in the rear, said, "Drive easy, buddy-boy. We don't want no accidents, not now with that loot practically in our mitts."

Maas started the car foward along the rough road. He switched on the headlights in a few minutes, but the twilight, which made the headlights almost worthless, caused him to drive even slower.

The road was fairly smooth for a while, then got into rougher country, and by the time full darkness had fallen and the lights were functioning, the road had become so rough that Maas was reduced to driving at not much more than ten miles an hour.

The road followed the lines of least resistance. It had been an Indian trail, originally, and had nev-

er been improved. It was not intended for wagons, much less automobiles. It was sheer folly to drive it at night and around ten o'clock, after a particularly narrow escape from plunging off a sheer cliff, the bounty hunters gave up.

Sligo and Maas had no intention of leaving the prisoners unguarded through the night, but there was no reason for both of them to remain on guard.

The elevation of the ridge on which they had stopped was close to five thousand feet and it had grown bitterly cold. There were no blankets for any of the party.

The bounty hunters came to an agreement after a short discussion. Sligo would take the first watch, Maas the second. Maas decided that he would sleep in the front seat of the car where he had some protection.

The prisoners were ordered out of the car so that Sligo, who intended to move around to keep warm, could keep a better watch over them.

The callousness of the two men angered Halleran, but he had a private reason for submitting and registered no complaint. Young Tommy Langford protested angrily, and for his pains was savagely cuffed by Sligo and ordered to lie down on the rocky ground some thirty or forty feet from the car.

Halleran and Betty sat down a dozen feet from the car. She was still trying to keep her cuffed

hand from touching Halleran's hand. He allowed her to keep the chain taut between them for about ten minutes.

Then, after keeping his eyes on Maas in the car and seeing him lying with his head on the back of the seat, with his mouth wide open, he said in a low voice: "Stop being a fool and listen. I'm risking my life because of you."

"I can't help it," she said jerkily. "I know I practically forced you into this, but—"

"Shut up," Halleran snapped. "If it comes to a showdown who are they going to kill—me or your Tommy? I'm worth ten times as much as he is."

"They won't hurt him," she said stubbornly, "not as long as I—" She left her sentence unfinished, but he knew what she meant.

He groaned. "You're living in a fairy-tale world. Now listen good—because if you don't play along, I'm going to make an issue of it with these boys right now, and we'll find out whether they'll choose five thousand or five hundred and a quick tumble."

He felt her recoil, but she did not protest audibly and he went on: "If you've got a hairpin, I think I can get these cuffs loose."

She exclaimed softly, "They've got the guns. What can you do—you're unarmed!"

"I know. I've got to pick the right time." He stopped as Sligo, wandering aimlessly back and



forth, approached them. He stopped, looking down at them.

"You gonna sit up all night?" he demanded truculently.

"It's too damn cold to sleep," Halleran said.

"You can snuggle up and keep warm," Sligo snickered.

"Get your mind out of the gutter," snapped Halleran.

"Look who's talking!" sneered Sligo. "That why you killed your wife? 'Cause she wanted loving and you couldn't give it to her?"

"Take off the cuffs," said Halleran, "and we'll see who's the better man. And I'll even keep one hand behind my back."

"Keep talking," said Sligo, "an' I'll take the cuff off her and snap it around your ankle. Then I'll get myself warm, my way."

Halleran heard Betty's gasp and realized that he had gone too far. He said, "Maybe we could build a fire to keep us all warm."

"There's no wood around here," said Sligo, casting a quick look about. He shivered and stamped his feet. Then he went off, resuming his pacing.

"Give me the hairpin," Halleran whispered to Betty.

She raised her hand carelessly to her head, then brought it down and after a moment dropped it against Halleran's handcuffed hand.

He hunched around so that his back was partly to Sligo.

"Nudge me if he comes close," he said to Betty.

He began working with the hairpin. The handcuffs were old, the keyhole was rusted and the mechanism was stiff. The hairpin was an extremely thin one.

"Haven't you got a thicker hairpin?" he asked. Betty after a while.

"They're all the same," she replied, "and I've only got a couple left."

The first hairpin broke in half after a few moments more. He got a second hairpin, braided the two lengths together with difficulty, then bent the reinforced hairpin and attacked the keyhole of the cuffs. The doubled hairpin snapped almost immediately.

Weaving it together had weakened it.

He stifled a groan.

Betty was able to find only one more hairpin. Halleran, working more cautiously, spent a patient twenty minutes with the pin. It was no use. He could not spring the handcuff lock.

"I can't do it in the dark," he finally admitted to Betty. "I'll save the hairpin until it's light."

It was a miserable night. Betty was soon moving closer to Halleran to get whatever warmth she could from his body. They sat part of the time back to back, then close beside each other. They were still cold.

Tommy Langford was having his own problem of keeping warm, but solved it by getting up now and then, stamping and moving about to get some warmth. The bounty hunters themselves complained bitterly about the cold.

Sligo got Maas to take over inside of a couple of hours, but he got no sleep apparently in the car and was soon stomping around.

The sky was only beginning to pale when the bounty hunters herded the prisoners into the car.

Halleran wondered if he had missed his chance, but he knew that it was almost a hundred and fifty miles more to the Rio Grande and he did not believe that their captors would drive that far without wanting something to eat.

For that matter, he doubted if

the car would hold up that long. The tires had been rubber-bare when they had left *San Jose del Mochis*. There might be a spare tire in the trunk, but there might not be.

It wasn't a tire, however, that brought the car to a halt finally. It was the gasoline, or the lack of it. It was shortly after seven when the sun was already bright that the motor of the ancient vehicle choked, coughed and died. Glancing at the gauge, Maas swore roundly.

"Call the Auto Club," suggested Halleran.

Sligo, from the rear seat, gave Halleran a vicious judo chop in the back of the neck.

The two bounty hunters got out of the car. Then Maas let out an exclamation of triumph. He pointed toward some faded lettering on a rock on the right side of the road.

"*Felicidad del Rey*, eight kilometers," he chortled. "How much is that in miles?"

Sligo screwed up his face. "It ain't that much in miles."

"Multiply by five, divide by eight," said Halleran. "Five miles."

Maas' triumph faded. "I ain't carryin' no gas bucket five miles." His eyes fixed upon Halleran, then Tommy Langford. "Not with a couple of strong backs handy."

"I'll get the gas," Halleran volunteered without hope.

Sligo let out a snort. "You'd come back with a couple of *rurales*,

if you come back at all, which I know damn well you wouldn't."

"You didn't let me finish," said Halleran. "Naturally, one of you'd go along with me—or the whole crowd, for that matter."

"With you wearing handcuffs?" Sligo shook his head. "We don't know how big this *Felicidad* place is. I never even heard of it, so it's probably a pretty small place. But somebody's sure to have some gas and we're going to get it."

His eyes fixed themselves upon Langford. "I'm going with you, punk, but you'll do the lugging."

"You expect me to carry a big can with my hands cuffed?" demanded Tommy.

"Oh, I'll take the cuffs off before we get to the place," said Sligo, "but I'll have my hand in my pocket and it'll be grabbing my gun every second. One wrong move and we deliver you dead." His voice became grating. "Besides—" He gestured to Maas. "He'll be back here with a gun on your sweetie. Anybody but us two comes back, he'll know what to do."

Langford was loath to leave, but Sligo prodded him with a gun and the two men went off. Maas followed the two for a few yards and Halleran promptly got busy with Betty's last hairpin. For the first few minutes he had no more luck than he had had with the previous hairpins, but then he suddenly heard a faint click and he was able to pull the link apart.

"Let's get out and stretch," he said in a low tone to Betty. He opened the car door.

Maas was coming toward the car.

"Set!" he yelled. "I ain't gonna chase you all around."

"We've been sitting here, cramped, for two hours," complained Halleran.

"Stay cramped for two hours more," Maas snapped. He gestured with Halleran's automatic. "Man in your position's liable to try anything, and I wouldn't want to have to kill you and lose the five thou."

It was a dead end. There were rocks all about and Halleran had counted on grabbing one up and using it on Maas, but if he could not get out of the car and was unable to get close to Maas he could do nothing.

Two weary hours went by. Halleran's eyes had already picked out the rock he would scoop up if he could get out of the car, but Maas never moved more than thirty or forty feet away from the car, and he seldom took his eyes off the occupants of the car for more than a moment.

Another half hour passed. Maas was getting restless. If they had not gotten into difficulty, Sligo and Langford should be making their appearance.

They could have covered the five miles to *Felicidad del Rey* and back, if they had not spent too

much time getting the gasoline and walked swiftly both ways.

Maas began moving farther from the car and spent more time looking up the trail. He could see for several hundred feet up the road before it turned and dipped out of sight.

At one time, Maas moved seventy or more feet away from the car and Halleran said to Betty: "A few feet more and I'm going to make a break for it."

"No," exclaimed Betty. "He'll shoot you."

"I don't think he's that good a shot. I think I can get him with a rock."

"But if you miss he'll get you."

Halleran was spared from making the attempt, for Maas turned just then and started back toward the car. He came to within fifteen feet and stopped, scowling at the occupants of the car.

"They're taking their damn time about it," he growled.

"Sure," Halleran said. "They're probably in the local hoosegow by now."

"You'd like that, wouldn't you?" sneered Maas. "Don't worry about Sligo. He's awful handy with that thirty-eight of his." He looked directly at Betty. "If he's in the hoosegow, you can bet your boy friend's dead."

Betty exclaimed softly and Halleran touched her hand to reassure her. But he could not quite stifle a sudden groan.

Beyond Maas, Sligo and Langford had appeared on the road.

Langford was in the lead, carrying a bucket and behind him came Sligo. They were still a hundred yards or more away, but Sligo thought it necessary to announce their impending arrival by halloping.

Maas whirled, saw the approaching men and started forward to meet them.

"It's now or never," said Halleran and slipped off the cuffs. He started out of the car, climbing over the car door so Maas would not hear the car door open.

Maas was almost fifty feet from the car when Halleran hit the rocky ground. Halleran had to move a few feet more to get the good throwing rock he had selected.

Beyond Maas, the approaching men saw Halleran's move and the situation suddenly exploded.

Sligo, seeing Halleran, rushed forward. He thrust out his revolver and fired. The range was much too great for the bullet to come anywhere near Halleran, but the warning shot alerted Maas, who whirled and saw Halleran.

What happened then was over in a split second. Sligo, inadvertently, had rushed past Langford. The youth, trying to stop Sligo, struck out at him with the bucket containing the several gallons of gasoline. The gasoline doused Sligo from his waist to his feet.

He whipped up his gun instinc-



tively and fired it at Langford. The bullet went wild. But the muzzle fire from the gun's explosion ignited the gasoline vapor and Sligo was suddenly enveloped in flames. His awful scream came over and so startled Maas, in the act of firing at Halleran, that Maas' bullet went far off its mark. Then Maas turned and saw the pyre of flame that was Sligo.

He cried out in awe, his feet frozen to the ground. Halleran ran forward a few feet, stopped abruptly and threw the two-pound rock at a distance of less than twenty feet. It caught Maas squarely in the back of the head, crushing his skull.

By the time Halleran reached

the blazing Sligo, the second bounty hunter was dead.

Tommy, Betty and Halleran walked to *Felicidad del Rey*. It was a Mexican village only slightly larger than *San Jose del Mochis*, which they had left the day before. But they learned that a bus came to *Felicidad* and was due in that very morning.

"We're going back to Alabama," Betty told Halleran then. "We've talked it over and Tommy's going to stand trial. No matter what happens."

"I don't think too much will happen," said Halleran. "If it was a fist fight, like you told me, a jury can't make more than manslaughter out of it. A year . . ." He shrugged.

"I can do a year standing on my head," said Tommy Langford fervently. "As long as I know that . . ."

His eyes went to Betty, who took his hand in both of hers.

She looked at Halleran. "And you, Mr. Halleran, or is it really O'Hara?"

"It's O'Hara, all right," said Halleran. "The poster is me, but it's an old one. Six months." He paused. "My wife had a nervous breakdown. She committed suicide. It looked like murder. I did what Tommy did. I skipped out. But I went back and a post mortem brought out the facts."

He paused again, then went on harshly, remorselessly, "I didn't kill her and I was acquitted, but I still had to answer myself. My wife's condition, at the time of her suicide, was as much my fault as her own. I hadn't treated her decently. I'd taken up with another woman and—" He made a hopeless gesture. "I've had to live with myself and I haven't enjoyed it . . . But somehow I feel better right now, a lot better."

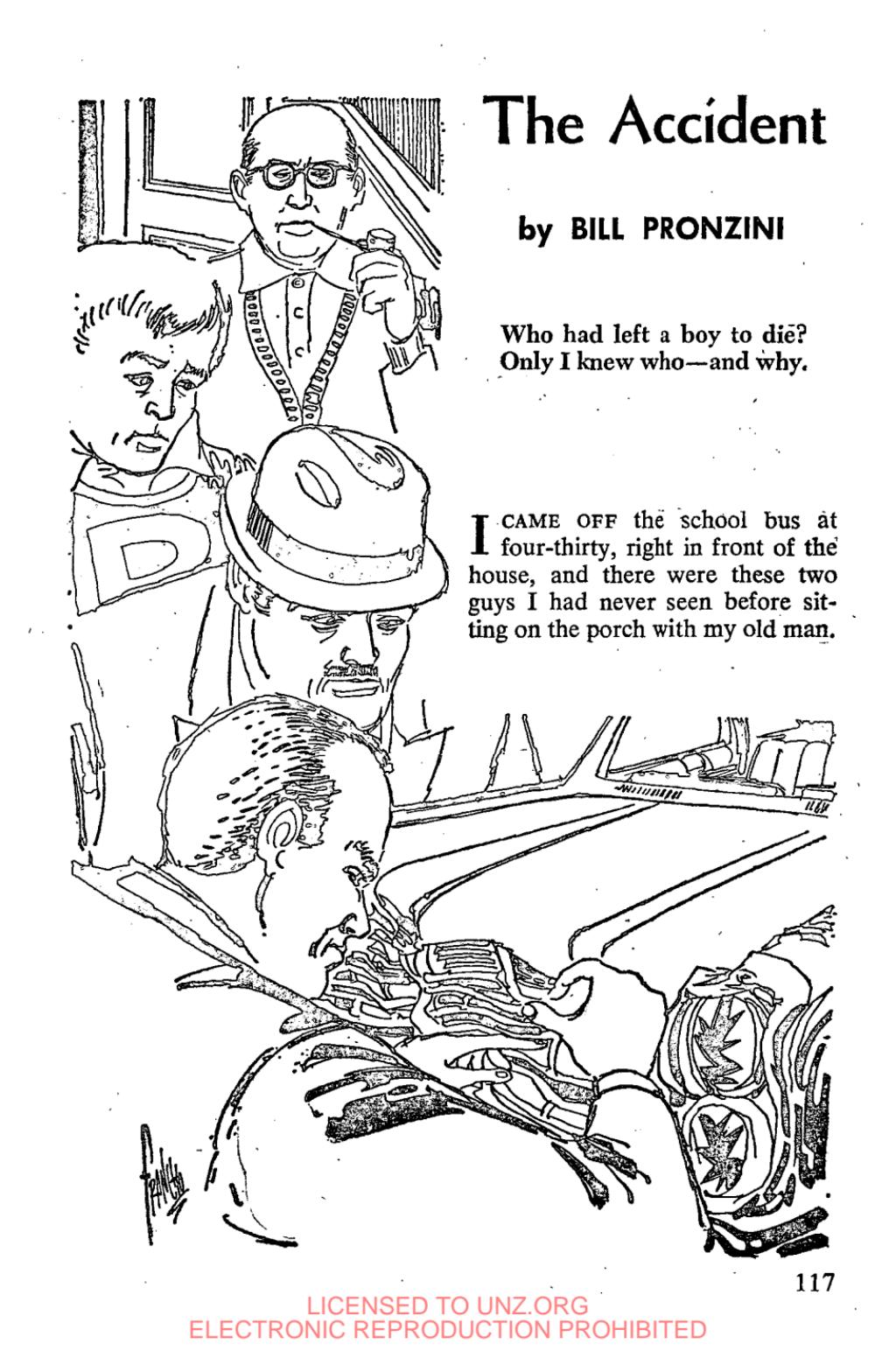
"Because you risked your life," said Betty, "to help Tommy and me."

A wan smile came over Halleran's face.

Yes, he thought, and he hoped that a dead woman would somehow know.



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The Accident

by BILL PRONZINI

Who had left a boy to die?
Only I knew who—and why.

I CAME OFF the school bus at four-thirty, right in front of the house, and there were these two guys I had never seen before sitting on the porch with my old man.

Both of them stood up as I started up the brick path, and when I came to the porch they were standing there with their hats in their hands, blocking the way. My old man was just sitting in the porch rocker, staring out at the street.

I stopped, looking at these two guys. They were pretty young. One of them was big. He had a big belly and bad teeth. The other one was kind of thin, with an egg-shaped head that had a bald spot right in the center. He was wearing this purple knit tie with a shiny silver bar holding it to his shirt.

My old man stopped his rocking and looked at me.

"Ben," he said. He sounded scared. "These two fellows are from the police. They want to ask you some questions."

"Police?" I said.

"That's right," the one with the round paunch said. "My name is Hatton. This is Inspector Rothstein."

I said, "It's nice to meet you. But I don't know why you'd want to see me."

"Suppose we go inside and talk about it," this Hatton said.

"Sure," I said. "All right. Why not?"

My old man got up from his rocker.

"What's going on, Pop?" I said to him.

"I don't know," my old man

said. "They wouldn't tell me anything."

"Shall we go inside?" Hatton said.

We all went into the living room. The cops sat on the sofa. My old man sat in his recliner and I pulled a wicker chair over in front of where the two cops were.

"What's it all about?" I said to them.

"You own a car. That right, Ben?" Hatton said.

"Sure."

"What make?"

"A Ford," I said. "Two door hardtop."

"What year?"

"Fifty-seven."

"Color?"

"Black."

"License number?"

"YDJ-799."

"Where is it now?"

"Out in the garage."

"Something the matter with it?"

"What gave you that idea?"

"We saw you coming off the bus," Rothstein said.

"Oh," I said. "Well, I had a little accident."

Both of them sat up straight on the couch. They looked at each other. Hatton said, "What kind of accident?"

I gave him a sheepish look.

"It was a pretty dumb thing," I said. "Wasn't it, Pop?"

"Sure," my old man said. He wet his lips. "It was a dumb thing to do."

"Suppose you tell us about it," Hatton said.

"I went to put it in the garage last night," I said. "You know how it is when you put a car away in the garage—it's sort of a routine thing. You don't pay much attention or anything."

"Go on."

"Well, what happened, I ran into the garage wall. I mean, I just drove right in there, not paying any attention, you know, and the next thing, there's this loud kind of clunk. When I got out to take a look, there was the front end, right up on the wall. Both headlights were broken, and the hood was pushed in some and the whole bumper just ruined. It was a dopy thing, sure enough."

They looked at each other again. The thin one, Rothstein, kept twirling his hat in between his thumb and forefinger. This Hatton got out a cigarette and lit it and found an ashtray and put the match inside. It was pretty quiet in there.

Then this Hatton said, "Mind telling us where you were last night, Ben?"

"Last night?"

"Between nine-thirty and ten."

"Well, right here," I said.

"You're positive?"

"Sure," I said. "It rained last night. Where can you go on a school night when it rains?"

"You didn't go out at all?"

"Not once."



Hatton looked over at my old man. "What do you say, Mr. Jarmann?"

"That's right," my old man said. "We were watching the television."

"And you're certain Ben was home at nine-thirty?"

"We were watching the television," my old man said again.

Hatton turned back to me. "What time did you go out to put your car in the garage?"

"A little after ten," I said.

"And that was when you ran into the garage wall."

"That's it," I said. "Say, all these questions. Why don't you tell us what it's all about?"

"We're investigating an accident," Rothstein said.

"An accident?"

"Hit and run," Hatton said.

"I don't understand."

"A car ran down a young boy on Southgate Avenue a little past nine-thirty last night. Hit and run. The driver didn't even slow down."

"That's terrible," I said. "Was he badly hurt?"

"Head injuries," Rothstein said. "He's on the critical list."

"Do they think he'll be all right?" my old man asked.

"He's got a chance," Hatton said.

I pulled at my ear. "Well, it's too bad about the boy," I said. "But I don't know what all this has got to do with me."

"There was a witness to this accident," Hatton said. "Saw the whole thing. As near as this witness could tell, the car was a black Ford, an older model. He got a partial on the license plate. The first two letters. YD."

"There must be a lot of black Fords in this city that have license plates that begin with YD," I said.

"That's right," Hatton said. "There are. We're checking them all."

My old man gave this nervous little laugh. "Then all this, it's just routine. You're here just because Ben has a car like the one you're looking for."

"Something like that," Rothstein said, looking at me.

Hatton said, "You don't mind if we have a look at your car, do you, Ben?"

"No," I said. "No, I don't mind."

I took them through the kitchen to where this door leads out into the garage. The Ford was sitting where I'd left it the night before, after I'd backed it away from the wall. I switched on the light.

The two of them went over and looked at the front end. It was banged in plenty. Hatton bent down, squinting at the bumper.

He stood up. "You must have hit the wall pretty hard," he said.

"I did that, all right," I said. "Some rap."

"You usually that careless?"

"No, sir," I said. "I don't know what I was thinking about. It was a pretty dumb thing."

He looked at the marks on the wall where I had hit it. Glass from the broken headlights was still on the floor.

After a time he said, "You ever had a traffic citation, Ben?"

"Well," I said. "One. Just one."

"What for?"

I wet my lips. "Drag racing."

Hatton's eyebrows went up. "Oh?" he said.

"It's not what you think," I said. "It was just a couple of us fooling around out on Airport Road. I mean, it wasn't one of these high-speed things, or anything like that. You know how it is when a bunch of guys get to fooling around that way."

Hatton was over looking at the hood on the Ford. It was sprung, and the catch wasn't fastened. He hauled it up.

"Nice," he said.

"Well, it's okay."

"Looks pretty quick."

I shrugged.

"Lot of modifications there," he said. "Build it yourself?"

"Sure," I said.

"Must have taken a lot of work."

"Most of last summer."

He lowered the hood. He took a cigarette out of his pocket and tamped it on his wrist. "You do much racing, Ben?"

"I've been out to the Strip a couple of times," I said.

"But not on the streets."

"No, sir."

"Just that one time, is that it?"

"That's it."

"Guy that hit the little boy," Rothstein said. "We figure he must have been doing at least fifty. It's twenty-five on Southgate. Fifty's fast on a residential street, wouldn't you say, Ben?"

"Sure," I said.

"Look," my old man said. He was standing over near the doorway. "We told you, Ben was home last night. He didn't go out. Why do you have to keep asking all these questions?"

"Seems kind of funny, is all," Hatton said. "The same night a little boy gets run down by a black Ford with a YD license plate, a fellow who owns a car just like that runs into a garage wall."

"Coincidence," my old man said. He was pretty nervous.

"Maybe," Hatton said. "But this fellow, he has an expensive engine in this Ford. Lot of work. He knows all about cars, too, seems like. And he keeps it up. Not a scratch on the rest of it. Very

careful, I'd say. Maybe even fussy. But then, all of a sudden, on this one night, he just up and drives this car of his, the one he's done all this work on and been so careful of, he drives it into the garage wall. Now I'd call that a pretty funny coincidence, wouldn't you, Mr. Jarman?"

My old man looked down at the floor. I said, "I told you, it was just one of those things. One of those stupid things that happen to you."

"That's right; you told us," Hatton said.

"You don't believe me, do you?"

"Should we?"

"Well, it's the truth."

"Maybe it is and maybe it isn't," Hatton said. "But suppose I tell you the way it looks to me?"

I didn't say anything.

"How I see it," he said, "you were out joy-riding last night. Maybe somebody challenged you to a race, or maybe you just like to spin around in the rain. I hear that's a game you kids play now. Anyway, you get up to about fifty there on Southgate, and then this little kid comes charging out into the street. You're going too fast. You can't stop in time. You barrel right into him, and then you panic. You come home here, and then you get this bright idea. You ram into the garage wall there, and leave all the broken glass on the floor with the front end smashed in, and it looks just like

what you claim. A nice smoke screen. What do you think of that version, Ben?"

"That's a good story," I said.

"Not any more so than the one you'd have us believe. Why don't you come clean, Ben?" Rothstein said. "It's going to go twice as hard on you if you don't."

"How many times do I have to tell you?" I said.

"The worst you can get is suspension of license and probation if you give us the story voluntarily," Hatton said. "But if you stick to this other thing, and we find out you're lying you could go to a detention home. Do you know what it's like in one of those places, Ben?"

"Listen," my old man said. "Why don't you leave him alone? He hasn't done anything."

"Take it easy, Pop," I said.

Hatton turned to face him. "What I just said about the detention home, Mr. Jarman," he said. "It could happen to Ben, all right. I can understand your wanting to protect him. Any father would do the same thing. But it's not the way. Come out into the open with this thing and we'll do all we can for him."

"Ben," my old man said to me. His voice was broken.

"The hell with them, Pop," I snapped. I went over and got in front of Hatton.

He looked past me. "What do you say, Mr. Jarman?"

"They're trying to confuse you, Pop," I said to my old man. "They'll twist anything you say the way they want to hear it."

"Keep quiet, Ben," Hatton said sharply.

"The hell I will!" I said. "We don't have to take this kind of treatment from you."

He kept looking at my old man. My old man was staring at the floor. He shook his head. But he looked all right, now.

Hatton swung back to me, and his eyes were gray flecks of steel. "Okay, Ben. If this is the way you want it. We'll do it the hard way."

"You can do it any way you want to," I said. "If you're so sure I'm the one you're looking for, why don't you take a sample of the paint or something. You cops have ways of matching up things like that."

"Maybe that's just what we'll do," Hatton said.

"Well, why don't you then? Maybe that will convince you."

"You're a smart boy, Ben," Hatton said. You could tell the way his nostrils were flaring white he was having a time keeping himself under control. "Maybe too smart."

"I don't know what you mean."

"Smart and lucky," Hatton said. "Mostly lucky. You got the car home and you checked it over. The headlights weren't broken. Very little paint, if any, chipped off. Most of the impact was taken

on the bumper. Whatever paint there might have been at the scene would have been washed away in the rain. There was nothing to link the accident to you except the dented bumper. That's when you got your bright idea."

"You're nuts," I said.

"I've got half a mind to take you down town, boy," Hatton said. He was plenty angry.

"Why don't you?" I said. "You're not going to find anything, because there's nothing to find."

"All right, Ben," Hatton said. His mouth was a white line. "The both of us know what the score is. You've got the upper hand for now. But I'm going to put in for a warrant and we'll go over that car of yours with a fine comb. With any luck at all, we'll find something. And I'm going to talk to everybody I can find who knows you. Your friends, neighbors. Everybody. Somebody's going to remember seeing you out last night, or seeing your car, and when I find that someone I'm going to come back here and slap you into juvenile hall so fast you won't know what hit you."

"I didn't have anything to do with it," I said. "You come around here again and threaten me like that and we'll get a lawyer. There's a law against this kind of thing."

"Smart kid," Hatton said.

He was clenching and unclenching his hands. Rothstein



went over and put a hand on his shoulder.

"Come on, Ed," he said to Hatton. "Let's get out of here."

"Yeah," Hatton said.

They went out through the side door of the garage. I went there and watched them get into this black wagon that was parked across the street. They sat there for a time, staring over at where I was, and then Rothstein, who was driving, took it away. I went back to where my old man was.

"Ben," he said. "Ben—"

"It's okay, Pop."

He dry-washed his face. He was white as a sheet. "Come on," I said. "Let's go inside."

"All right, Ben."

We went into the house. I said, "Do you want to sit out on the porch?"

"Yes."

We went out there and he sat down in the rocker. "Listen," I said. "Have you eaten anything today?"

"No, I couldn't eat."

"Well, I'll fix something."

"I don't want anything."

"You got to eat, Pop."

He just shook his head. I said, "You just sit here awhile, Pop. I'll fix something."

He didn't say anything. I went inside and got some eggs and ham from the refrigerator and cooked them up and made some coffee. When it was ready I went out onto the porch. My old man was still sitting in that rocker, bumping back and forth.

"Supper's ready, Pop."

He just nodded his head, rocking. He was hugging himself with his arms.

"You cold, Pop?"

"No."

"You want me to get your sweater?"

"No."

"You sure you're okay, Pop" I said.

"Sure," he said. "I'm all right."

But he didn't look all right. He looked old and tired and shook out. You could see the lines like knife cuts in his cheeks and the pouches of dark skin under his

eyes. I knew he hadn't slept all night.

I said, "You shouldn't be thinking about it so much, Pop."

"I can't help it," he said. "I can't help it, Ben."

"Just take it easy," I said. "The kid's going to be all right. I called the hospital. It's over. It's done now."

"No," he said. "It's not done. It will never be done."

"Pop—"

"I can't help it," he said again. He looked up at me. "Ben, I'm going down to the police."

"No," I said. "No, you're not."

"Ben, it's no good this way."

"It's the only way."

"It's on me like a weight. I don't know what to do."

"There's nothing for you to do, Pop," I said. "Just put it out of your mind."

"The way they were talking to you," he said. "I couldn't take it, Ben."

"I know, Pop."

"They'll keep hounding you. They'll take the car. They'll find something."

"They won't find anything."

"But what if they do?"

"Don't think about it, Pop."

I went over and put my arm around him. Sure, I thought, maybe they'll find something, but the chances of it were pretty slim. They were sharp ones, both of them, but it was a wall they had to get over and the wall was pretty

high. They might find somebody who had seen the car out, but one black Ford looks pretty much like any other. And the nearest neighbor we had was almost a quarter mile away, and set back from the road. I didn't think they would have seen the car leaving or coming back.

I hadn't expected running into the garage wall to fool them, but it was the only way I could think of to do to cover the bumper being dented in. I knew that if they managed to trace the car at all, they'd figure it for what it was, and they'd done that, all right. Except for one thing.

I looked down at my old man. He looked terrible. He'd never been quite the same since Mom died a little over a year ago, and I guess his mind was going on him. I should have known better that night when we were sitting there watching the television. My old man had been out of tobacco for his pipe, and he'd asked for the keys to go down to the store. I hadn't thought much about it.

It was all my fault.

I don't know what it was. Maybe not being used to the car, and how fast it was. Or the heavy rain. But he'd panicked pretty bad when he hit the little boy. I don't know how he got the car home after it happened. He'd been in a state of shock.

I knew what it would do to him if they found out it was him driving the car and not me, and I couldn't let that happen. He was all that I had now, and I couldn't let that happen.

My old man looked up at me. His eyes were all wet.

"You're a good boy, Ben," he said. "A good boy."

I squeezed his shoulder.

"We're going to be okay, Pop," I said. "You just leave everything to me, and we're going to be okay."

"Sure," he said, rocking. "Sure, Ben."

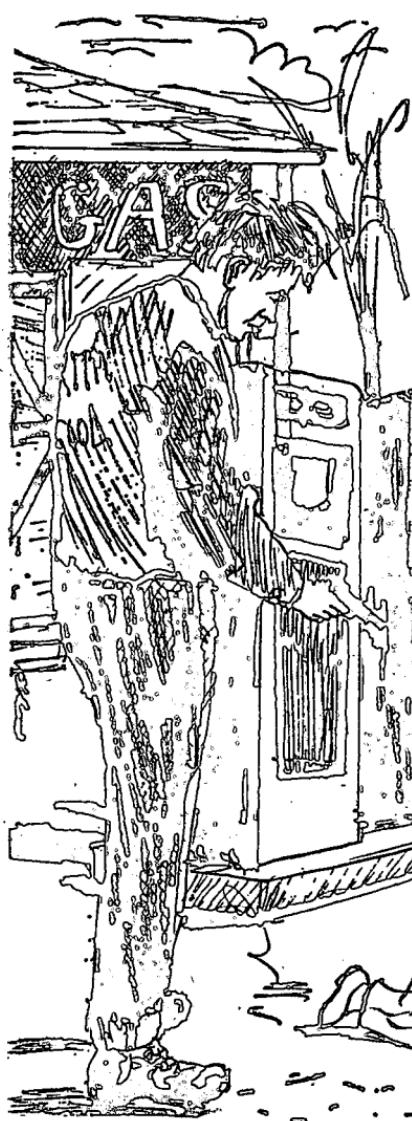
I sat down on the steps near him, and listened to the night sounds.

The sky was full of stars.



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YOU GOT TO WATCH BEN



*A dead man lay at my feet,
His killer was at my side.
And I—what could I say?
Who had really killed Jim?*

by JACK RITCHIE

BEN IS strong and he's got a temper. You have to know when to give way.

"All right," I said after a while. "Let's go." And we got off the

front steps and walked toward cousin Jim's service station down at the end of the block.

I watched Ben as we walked. You have to keep an eye on him. If you don't, it seems like anything he picks up breaks or bends.

Up ahead, I could see Jim sitting on the bench in the shade of the station. He was cleaning his pistol again.

Jim usually takes a long time between shaves, -but he claims he's got the brains among all the kin.

He was married once, but it didn't take. I heard tell that he beat his wife. People say he's got a mean streak, but I didn't come across anything like that yet.

Jim saw us coming and slipped some cartridges into the gun.

He told me that he had bought the gun to protect himself in case of a robbery, but I think that he just likes to fool with guns.

When we walked up, Jim pointed the gun right at Ben's head.

Ben thought that was funny and he laughed.

I was a little nervous though. "That gun's got bullets in it."

Jim showed yellowish teeth. "Now would I point a loaded gun at a cousin?" Then he broke open the gun and looked surprised. "Well, doggone. How did those bullets get in there?" and he laughed.

A car pulled up beside the pumps and Jim put the gun in his pocket and walked over.

He gave the man two dollars worth of gas and went inside the station for change.

Jim rang up the money on the cash register and put the five dollar bill under the spring clip. He pulled out three ones, took some saving stamps out of the book, and went back out to the car.

Ben reached for the savings stamps.

"Stay away from those," I said.

Ben looked my way and the orange in his brown eyes seemed to flicker.

"Come on, Ben," I said easy. "Let's go back outside."

We went back to the bench and sat down. Jim came back after the customer left.

He reached for the can of beer on the window sill, took a big swallow, and put it back. He squinted some cigarette smoke out of his eye and took the gun out of his pocket.

He broke it open again and rapped cartridges into his palm. Then he handed the gun to Ben.

"Put the barrel up against your head, Ben," he said. "Pull the trigger. That's what they call Russian roulette."

Ben took the gun, but he didn't seem to know what Jim meant.

Another car pulled into the station. The customer got out and said, "Three bucks worth of regular," and then went inside the station to the lavatory.

Jim went to the pumps.

Ben stared at the gun the way he does, when he tries to figure out what something is.

I was afraid he might drop it. "Give me the gun, Ben."

The orange inside his eyes went on again and I knew he was going to be stubborn.

I grabbed the barrel of the gun and pulled.

The noise didn't seem loud, but it was sharp.

My heart stopped for a second and I thought that the bullet might have hit me. But then it started beating again and I knew I wasn't hurt.

I turned and saw Jim standing at the rear of the customer's car. Just standing there stiff, his back toward us.

I noticed the small hole in the back of his jacket, but the blood didn't come from there. It came from the bottom of his jacket.

And then suddenly he dropped.

I looked back at Ben. His mouth was open like he didn't understand what had happened.

The door of the station opened and the customer's eyes got wide when he saw Jim on the cement. "What happened?"

"It was an accident," I said.

The customer looked at Jim's body once more and then went back inside to the phone.

The first squad car came in just a couple of minutes, its light flashing, and then there were more.

I began to think hard about

what had happened. Would the police believe it was really an accident? And even if they did, what would they do to somebody like Ben? Did they have a special place where they would be kind to him?

One of the policemen took out a notebook. "Tell me about it."

I took a deep breath. "I'm the one who did it. I was holding the gun and I thought it was unloaded. I saw Jim take out the bullets, but I guess he forgot to count them."

They asked me more questions and I finally thought they were through, but then one of them came to the station from a house across the street.

"We got an eye witness," he said. "Lady across the street. About seventy or so and spends her time in a wheelchair on that screened porch." He looked at me. "It was an accident, all right, but not quite the way you tell it."

After supper I went out and sat on the front steps. I watched a woman get off at the bus stop.

She stopped in front of me. "Can you tell me where the Johnsons live?"

I nodded. "Right across the street. The white house."

She thanked me. "I suppose you go to school?"

I felt kind of proud. "I'm already in the fourth grade." I pointed to where Ben played with his fire engine in the dirt. "But my brother's nearly three and he can't even talk good yet."

(Continued from other side)

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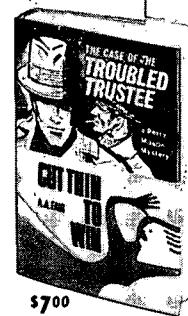
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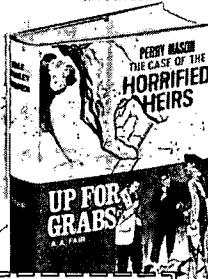
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